The Saban Center
for Middle East Policy
at the Brookings Institution

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The "Shi'i Crescent": Myth and Reality

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Executive Summary

This paper argues that far from there being a threatening "Shi'i crescent," or a Middle East about to be torn apart along Muslim sectarian lines, the pattern has been for mixed Sunni-Shi'i states to remain intact. The reason is that important differences remain among Shi'i communities. In many cases, the Shi'ah are more concerned with changing their lot within their existing countries than in binding themselves to Iran, the largest Shi'i community in the region, or in creating any other form of pan-Shi'i alliance.

As for Iran's regional ambitions, and its alleged leadership of a "Shi'i crescent," these are not expressed or implemented in a sectarian Shi'i fashion. Iranian foreign policy aims to advance Iranian national interests as much as to promote any sectarian Shi'i agenda. Furthermore, the growing importance of the Shi'i Arabs of Iraq poses a threat as much as it presents an opportunity to Iran. It is as likely that the Shi'i Arabs of Iraq will rival Iran for the leadership of Shi'i communities in the Persian Gulf as it is that the Iraqi Shi'i Arabs will join with Iran as part of a pan-Shi'i alliance.

The "Shi'i crescent" is therefore largely a myth that masks important, but malleable state interests. By rejecting this myth, the United States can see the Shi'ah in the Middle East for what they are: varied communities with as much dividing them as uniting them, potential partners in some places and aspiring adversaries in others.

The eventual nature of relations between Iran and Shi'i Arab Iraq is a core issue for the Middle East. The nature of these relations will have a tremendous impact upon the smaller Shi'i communities in the Arab Middle East. Tehran prefers an undivided but weak Shi'i-dominated Iraq rather than an Iraq divided into three states: Shi'i, Sunni and Kurdish. A disintegrated Iraq poses a mixture of opportunity and threat that Iran would probably prefer to avoid. Iran is likely to exert strong influence over any Shi'i mini-state in southern Iraq and may even annex it. At the same time, Iran might encounter a significant domestic challenge were there to be an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq because this might encourage separatist feelings in Iran's Kurdish population.

Even if the Iraqi Shi'ah Arabs emerge dominant and victorious in the current conflict with Iraq's Sunni Arabs, they might not prove to be the close allies of Iran that many imagine. Iran, after all, has pursued policies in contradiction with those of its apparent Iraqi Shi'i allies. For the moment, Iran, like Syria, has no stake in a stable Iraq. Fostering instability in Iraq is a means of indirectly inflicting damage on the United States, but it has also imposed a steep cost on the Iraqi Shi'ah. Quite how relations between Iran and Iraq will develop over the long-term is unclear, but the end result might not be to Iran's liking.

The Author

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Introduction

In an interview with *The Washington Post* published on December 8, 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah II uttered a grim warning regarding the Iraqi elections of January 30, 2005:

> If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, he said, a new "crescent" of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies…Abdullah, a prominent Sunni leader, said the creation of a new Shiite crescent would particularly destabilize Gulf countries with Shiite populations. "Even Saudi Arabia is not immune from this. It would be a major problem. And then that would propel the possibility of a Shiite-Sunni conflict even more, as you're taking it out of the borders of Iraq."[1]

Since this interview, other Arab leaders have come forward to express similar concerns. The specter of a "Shi'i crescent" influenced by Iran and stretching across the Middle East is a significant worry in the minds of America's Arab allies, as well as for the United States and Israel. It combines with their fears of Iran's regional ambitions and of Iran's nuclear program. President Husni Mubarak of Egypt told the *al-Arabiyya* television network on April 8, 2006 that "certainly Iraq belongs to the Shi'ah… Shi'ah form 65% of the Iraqis and there are Shi'is in large proportion in all these [Arab] states; and the Shi'ah are always loyal to Iran. Most of them have allegiance to Iran and not to their states."[2] Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faysal, also alluded to possible Sunni-Shi'i conflict in the region on September 22, 2005, while an Egyptian analyst predicted around the same time that "if it is a war between Sunni and Shi'ite, this war might be extended from Lebanon to Afghanistan."[3]

A bloody Sunni-Shi'i conflict, arguably a civil war, has since developed in Iraq, a battle initially engineered by Sunni insurgents in reaction to the Shi'i ascendancy that followed the toppling of Saddam Husayn's regime. There has also been Sunni-Shi'i violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan.[4]

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[1] Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2004, p. A01, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43980-2004Dec7.html>.

[2] Terrence Jeffrey, "The Sunni-Shi'ite Cold War or Worse," *Human Events,* October 16, 2006, available at <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3827/is_200610/ai_n17196736>.

[3] Charles Hanley, *Associated Press*, "An Iraq civil war will be felt far beyond its borders," *The Daily Times* (Pakistan), October 27, 2005, available at <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2005%5C10%5C27%5Cstory_27-10-2005_pg4_13>.

[4] Jeffrey, op.cit.

The appearance of a Sunni-Shi'i divide running across the Middle East has been further promoted by the rhetoric being used by some Sunni clerics and Sunni *jihadist* terrorists. Several Sunni clerics, particularly Wahhabis,[5] as well as the late al-Qa'ida leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, have incited Sunnis against the Shi'ah. Zarqawi proclaimed war on the Shi'ah in Iraq and Lebanon.[6] Wahhabi clerics depict the Shi'ah as heretics whose strand of Islam is, they claim, close to Judaism or to the pre-Islamic Persian religion of Zoroastrianism.[7] Significantly adding to the impression of a Muslim sectarian conflict in the Middle East, the almost exclusively Shi'i Hizballah (Party of God) movement in Lebanon was harshly criticized by Saudi Arabian, Egyptian and Jordanian leaders for its "irresponsible actions" against Israel in July 2006, actions that provoked a massive Israeli onslaught on Lebanon.[8]

Yet despite this specter of regional sectarian conflict, what is remarkable is how contained the effects of the Sunni-Shi'i conflict in Iraq have been to date. The lack of spillover in part stems from the primacy of local factors in the experience of the Middle Eastern Shi'ah. As a result, even in Lebanon, where the Shi'ah have been at their most assertive, Hizballah's actions have yet to lead to any violent anti-Shi'i reactions from either Sunni Arabs or Christians. Indeed, while several non-Shi'i Lebanese leaders have criticized Hizballah, others, such as the Maronite Emile Lahoud, have praised Hizballah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, as a new hero of Arabism.[9]

A similar pattern has been played out in other Arab countries, where there has been very little, if any, anti-Shi'i violence in response to the bloody Sunni-Shi'i conflict in Iraq. While militant Sunnis and Shi'ah in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have sustained their mutual mistrust and alienation from each other, the dominant trend among Shi'i communities in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, as exemplified by Kuwait, has been to strive for political and social integration on an equal footing with their Sunni Arab compatriots.

As this paper argues, far from there being a threatening "Shi'i crescent," or a Middle East about to be torn apart along Muslim sectarian lines, the pattern has been for mixed Sunni-Shi'i states to remain intact. The reason is that important differences remain among these Shi'i communities. In many cases, the Shi'ah are more concerned with changing their lot within their existing countries than in binding themselves to Iran, the largest Shi'i community in the region, or in creating any other form of pan-Shi'i alliance.

As for Iran's regional ambitions, these are not expressed or implemented in a sectarian Shi'i fashion. Iranian foreign policy aims to advance Iranian national interests as much as to promote any sectarian Shi'i agenda. Furthermore, the growing importance of the Shi'i Arabs of Iraq poses a threat as much as it presents an opportunity to Iran. It is as likely that the Shi'i Arabs of Iraq will rival Iran for the leadership of Shi'i communities in the Persian Gulf as the Shi'i Arabs of Iraq will join with Iran as part of a pan-Shi'i alliance.

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[5] For example, 'Ali bin al-Khudayr, Safar al-Hawali, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak, and the al-Qa'ida propagandist, Yusuf al-Ayyiri. See Michael Scott Doran, "The Saudi Paradox", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20040101faessay83105/michael-scott-doran/the-saudi-paradox.html>. See also Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi warning of the alleged dangers of Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement in L. Azuri, "Debate over the Status of Shi'ites in Egypt," Inquiry and Analysis Series, No. 311, The Middle East Media Research Institute, December 27, 2006 available at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA31106>.

[6] Thomas Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 2006), p. 27, footnote 53.

[7] Yitzhak Hasson, "The Wahhabis in the Eyes of post-Khomeini Shi'ia," unpublished paper, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, n.d., p. 1.

[8] Hassan M. Fattah, "Militia rebuked by some Arab Countries," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/17/world/middleeast/17arab.html?ex=1310788800&en=118bb15eee422f85&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>.

[9] Volkhard Windfuhr and Bernhard Zand interview with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, "Hezbollah Freed Our Country," *Spiegel Online International*, July 25, 2006, available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,428391,00.html>. There was also approbation for Nasrallah in Egypt, a Sunni Arab country: "After the Lebanese militia Hezbollah battled Israel for 34 days last summer, Hamada Abdullah, a Sunni Muslim, posted a small picture of Hassan Nasrallah, the group's leader, on the bare wall of his home. It did not matter that Nasrallah was a Shiite Muslim, who led an organization that only allowed Shiites to be members and was aligned with the Shiite Muslim state of Iran. To Abdullah, Nasrallah was first and foremost a bold Arab leader. A resistance leader." Michael Slackman, "Sectarian hostility drives wedge against pan-Muslim unity," *The International Herald Tribune*, January 17, 2007, available at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/17/news/arabs.php>.

Before discussing current developments and the policy challenges that they pose, it is worth briefly outlining the historical background of the Shi'i communities in the Middle East. History has significantly shaped their perceptions and attitudes, particularly with regard to the Sunni world. Perhaps the most important historical impact came from the Ottomans, whose varied treatment of Shi'i communities in such places as Lebanon and Iraq set the stage for the very different path of political development that each would eventually follow.

The Sunni-Shi'i divide goes back to the first decades of Islam, to the seventh century theological-political dispute over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad's close associates, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman, succeeded him one after the other as the *khalifa*,[10] the leader of the Muslim community of believers. This line of succession was rejected by those who considered 'Ali Bin Abu Talib, the fourth *khalifa*, and his issue, to be Muhammad's legitimate successor. 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was murdered in Kufa and was buried in Najaf (both in today's Iraq) in 661. The partisans of 'Ali and his rightful succession as *khalifa* are the *Shi'at 'Ali* ("faction of 'Ali"), hence the term "Shi'i." 'Ali's son, Husayn, later took up his father's cause. Husayn died fighting the Ummayyads, the Muslim dynasty based in Damascus that claimed the rightful succession to Muhammad, at the battle of Karbala (also in today's Iraq) in 680.[11] The Umayyads, and their successors, are "Sunni" because they follow the *sunna* ("path" or "example") of Muhammad. The Sunnis consider the Shi'ah *rawafid* (heterodox, those who reject the first *khalifas*). Some Sunnis, such as the Wahhabi school which emerged in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century, consider the Shi'ah to be so heretical that they are barely Muslims.

The Shi'ah are not a united group. They are divided into several sects, the largest of which is the Twelver Shi'ah (or the *Imamiyya*, the followers of Imam 'Ali). The Twelver believe that 'Ali was the first Imam (Islamic leader) after Muhammad and had divine features. His descendant, Muhammad al-Hassan al-Muntazar ("the awaited") was the twelfth Imam who disappeared and will return as *mahdi* ("guided by Allah"). Muhammad al-Hassan al-Muntazar's father, the eleventh Imam, was Hassan al-Askari, who was buried in 847 in Samarra (in today's Iraq, the shrine destroyed by Iraqi Sunnis in February 2006).

There are three other Shi'i sects of importance in the Middle East: the Zaydi, the Isma'ili and the 'Alawi. The Zaydi sect appeared in the eighth century and follows the fifth Imam, Zayd ibn 'Ali Zayn al-Abidin. There are Zaydi communities in southern Saudi Arabia and northern Yemen, a long-standing presence that straddles the Saudi Arabian-Yemeni border. The Isma'ili sect appeared in the ninth century and believes in the seventh Imam, Muhammad Bin Isma'il. There are small Isma'ili communities in Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen, with larger numbers in Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent. The third of the smaller Shi'i sects, and the last to appear, is also one of the most politically salient, the 'Alawi ("followers of 'Ali") sect that originated in the tenth century and that is sometimes known as *Nusayri* ("followers of Nusayr"). The 'Alawis believe in the Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali, Salman al-Farisi (a companion of Muhammad), and Muhammad ibn Nusayr (an associate of Hassan al-Askari, the eleventh Imam).

The Shi'i sects posed a severe challenge to the Sunnis in the Arab Middle East during the Middle Ages, in particular the Sunni Abbasid dynasty that ruled from Baghdad (750-1258). The Zaydis dominated Yemen after the early tenth century. Also during the tenth century, the Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty ruled Egypt, Syria and North Africa. The Isma'ili Qarmatian dynasty ruled in the eastern Arabian peninsula and parts of Syria until the twelfth century, while the Buwayhids (or Buyids, a Persian dynasty) and the Arab Hamdan

[10] Meaning "substitute", often rendered as *caliph* in English.
[11] On the Sunni-Shi'i dispute, see Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1962) pp. 186-98.

family, both pro-Shi'i dynasties, controlled Iran and parts of Syria.

In the end, the Shi'i challenge waned in the Arab Middle East and an era of Sunni dominance began that has lasted until today and that has determined both the fate of Shi'i communities and their geographic distribution. The Turkish Seljuk dynasty, which adhered to Sunni Islam, gained control over Persia, Iraq, Syria and Egypt during the eleventh century. Following the Seljuks, another Sunni dynasty, the Kurdish Ayyubids led by Salah al-Din, conquered the Levant and Egypt during the twelfth century, defeating the Crusaders in 1187 at the Horns of Hattin and recapturing Jerusalem. The Sunni Mamluk dynasty ruled Egypt and Syria from the mid-thirteenth century to the early sixteenth century. Finally, the Turkish Ottoman dynasty established the largest, most durable Sunni state in the Arab Middle East, that lasted from the sixteenth century until 1918. The Ottoman sultan also styled himself the *khalifa*, the successor to Muhammad.

While the Shi'i challenge was fended off, a new center of Shi'ism emerged as of the sixteenth century in Iran. The Azerbaijani Safavid dynasty established its control over Iran and imposed Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion, in place of the previously dominant Sunni Islam, and turned Qom and Mashhad into important religious centers. The Safavids conquered Iraq for short periods of time during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,[12] and Bahrain in the seventeenth century. Bahrain became an important Shi'i religious and cultural center, although it was conquered in 1783 by the Khalifa, a Sunni tribe from neighboring Qatar, that since that date has sometimes brutally ruled over its majority Shi'i population.

The historically variegated experience of the Shi'ah in the Middle East did not end with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of European rule and then European-crafted nation states. Instead, a study of Iranian statecraft and the transformation of Iraq, as well as the eastern and western wings of the so-called "Shi'i crescent" demonstrates that the primacy of local factors and tradition was reinforced during the twentieth century, making the notion of such a pan-Shi'i alliance at the start of the twenty-first century implausible.

[12] P.M. Holt, Ann K.S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Vol. B, pp. 339, 431. The same volume includes useful surveys of other Shi'i dynasties.

The Iranian Threat: Statecraft over Shi'ism

All the comment on Iran's alleged desire to create a "Shi'i crescent" under its leadership misses important aspects of Iranian policy. First, there is no clear evidence that Iran has ever sought to build a "Shi'i crescent" in the Middle East. There has never been any statement to that effect. Second, even in its most intense, revolutionary phase, Iran under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for an ecumenical Islamic revolution that was Islamic without national or sectarian distinction, that was neither Iranian nor Shi'i.

What Iran has striven for ideologically is to establish pan-Islamic unity with its center in Iran. At the helm in such a system is the *faqih* ("jurisprudent") the theological head of the Iranian state who exercises authority under the system of the *velayat-e faqih* ("rule of the jurisprudent").[13] By necessity, the *faqih* has to be both Iranian and Shi'i, but Iran has never articulated this structure in sectarian terms. The major appeal of this idea has been to Shi'i radical religious groups, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain. However, to a degree this doctrine has spread to militant Sunni groups, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and, to a lesser extent, Hamas. As for those who tend to reject this Iranian doctrine, the opposition prominently includes non-radical and secular Shi'ah as well as most Sunnis. Those who reject the concept of the *velayat-e faqih* do so as much because the Islamic revolution is considered a means of furthering Iranian national strategic interests as because it is seen as culturally and religiously Iranian and Shi'i. Thus the doctrine of the Islamic revolution propagated by Iran, and the objections of its Middle Eastern Muslim opponents, may have a sectarian tinge, but the substance of the disagreement is non-sectarian.

The disquiet that many feel about the doctrine of the Iranian Islamic revolution is the key to understanding the question of the "Shi'i crescent": that the interests of the state predominate. Post-Khomeini, the Iranian Islamic regime has endeavored to spread its religious ideology throughout the Muslim world to advance Iran's political interests and because of its belief in the intrinsic validity of this doctrine. Tehran has had more success at promoting these dual goals among the Shi'i communities of the Arab Middle East because of religious and cultural connections but, as noted above, some Palestinian Sunnis have been receptive. Yet Iran has deliberately fought shy of allowing the promotion of its ideology to come across as sectarian. Iran has refrained from proclaiming the construction of a "Shi'i crescent" as a strategic-ideological aim precisely because it does not want to alienate Sunni leaders and potential Sunni followers. Rather than using the Arab Shi'i communities as an Iranian "fifth column" in the Middle East, Iran has assisted them and fostered them

[13] David Menashri, *Iran; beyn Islam ve-Ma'arav* (Tel Aviv, Israel: Israel Ministry of Defense, 1996), pp. 133-6.

in such a manner as to spread Iran's ecumenical Islamic messages and to forge strategic alliances with Shi'i and non-Shi'i forces. The common denominator in the alliances and in the political messages driving them has not been the Shi'i faith but the so-called "enemies of Islam": Saddam Husayn's Iraq (until 2003), Israel and the United States.

Islamic Iran's first major alliances, that are still going strong since the early 1980s, have been with Syria, a state run by a clique that is only quasi-Shi'i and that has been ideologically secular, and Hizballah, a militant Shi'i movement in Lebanon. The glue of this alliance is not Shi'ism but the common "enemies of Islam." Each of the three elements of this alliance, Iran, Hizballah and Syria, has assisted the other in operations against the common "enemy." In 1983, Hizballah, possibly directed or backed by Iran and Syria, killed 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut, successfully forcing the removal of the United States and its allies from Lebanon. From 1983 to 2000, Hizballah, with undoubted Iranian and Syrian support, killed hundreds of Israeli soldiers in southern Lebanon, eventually obliging Israel to withdraw. Since then, Iran has continued to supply weapons to Hizballah, via Syria, to be used against Israel and to strengthen Hizballah's political power in Lebanon. To this end, Tehran and Damascus signed a military pact in June 2006,[14] on the eve of the crossborder Hizballah attack on Israel. Iran has also been a beneficiary of this alliance, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-8). Syria supported Iran logistically and diplomatically against Saddam Husayn's Iraq, their sworn mortal enemy.

This triangular association demonstrated its durability and value after Hizballah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and killed several others on July 12, 2006 on the Israeli side of the Israeli-Lebanese border. Although Hizballah probably miscalculated the extent of the Israeli counterattack, there were clear benefits to Iran and Syria from the escalation that followed Hizballah's initial assault.[15] Hizballah reacted to the Israeli counteroffensive by launching thousands of rockets into northern Israel, causing casualties, economic damage and widespread disruption. Thus Iran and Syria were, through a proxy, able to impose damage on Israel without suffering any direct costs themselves.

The increasingly assertive stance of Hizballah in Lebanese politics following the end of the Israel-Hizballah war will put this triangular alliance to the test. If Hizballah prevails, then this Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis will be strengthened and the position of key U.S. allies in the region, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, states that also happens to be overwhelmingly Sunni Arab, may be weakened. However, if Hizballah miscalculates again, if its military power is further dented following the damage inflicted by Israel during the summer of 2006, and its political position in Lebanon does not advance, then the triangular alliance could suffer a serious setback. Among the potential developments in the event of a Hizballah defeat could be a stark choice for the Syrian regime, whether to fight to support Hizballah (whether against its Lebanese enemies or in a renewed war with Israel) or to "defect" from the triangular alliance and revive the peace process with Israel. Each choice would have dramatic domestic and regional ramifications for each member of the triangular alliance.

The test ahead, therefore, is as much one of traditional alliances and statecraft, even if it involves a powerful non-state actor in the form of Hizballah, as of a supposed region-wide religious/sectarian identity. Understanding the nature of the contest in the Middle East, whether it is strategic/political with a sectarian tinge or vice versa, has significant consequences for policy formulation.

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[14] *Agence France Press*, "Iran and Syria sign pact against 'common threat'," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), June 19, 2006, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=73238>.

[15] Nasrallah said after the war that "We did not think, even 1 percent, that the capture would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude. You ask me, if I had known on July 11 ... that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not." See *Associated Press*, "Hezbollah leader says he never thought capture would lead to war," *The Khaleej Times*, August 28, 2006 available at <http://www.khaleejtimes.ae/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2006/August/middleeast_August736.xml&section=middleeast>.

The same applies to Iran and its relations with the Shi'ah of Iraq. Iranian leaders such as Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad obviously want to extend Iranian influence, if not tutelage, over Shi'i communities in the Middle East, with the Shi'ah of Iraq their priority because of their proximity to Iran. Iran will continue to employ its Shi'i religious clout, economic resources, political skills, intelligence services and the prestige of its nuclear potential to exert a pull on these Shi'i communities. Iran's aim is not to strengthen and expand Shi'i ideology, faith and culture but to advance its core strategic interests: the curbing of U.S. hegemony, counterbalancing and deterring other regional powers, fighting Israel, and perhaps exerting control over regional oil resources. Iraq is at the heart of this strategy because it poses both an opportunity and a challenge to Iran. For the Iranian regime, Iraq is a priority because of its strategic location, its oil resources and because it hosts the region's largest Shi'i population outside of Iran. At the same time, Iraq is a potential challenge to Iran because a strong Iraq, given its demographic weight within the context of the Arab Shi'ah and because it contains Shi'ism's most venerable shrines, could become an alternative center of Shi'i power.

Elements of the opportunity and the challenge are already visible. Iran exerts considerable influence over the Iraqi Shi'ah.[16] On the other hand, the tensions can be seen in the different views of Khamenei in Iran and Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani in Iraq over the role of clerics in government and of democracy in the Islamic state.[17] The obstacles to Iranian ambitions are also the same constraints that currently hold back the Iraqi Shi'ah as they attempt to exercise their formal political power: intense Sunni Arab opposition, a strong and autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as a continued U.S. military presence. Iran's best bet in the circumstances is to entrench its position in the overwhelmingly Shi'i south and center of Iraq, regions that will remain under Shi'i control no matter what political structure Iraqis eventually agree to.

[16] For more on Iranian influence, see Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," *Congressional Research Service*, July 9, 2007, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22323.pdf>. See also, Nazila Fathi, "Iran's President Dismisses U.S. Charges on Iraq," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/12/world/middleeast/12cnd-iran.html?ex=1328936400&en=df8cffff09e0d4b9&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>.

[17] Yitzhak Nakash, "The Shi'ites and the Future of Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2003, Vol. 82, No. 4, pp. 17-26. For a book length treatment, see Reuel Marc Gerecht, *The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy* (Washington D.C.: AEI Press, November 2004), available at <http://www.aei.org/docLib/20041115_book799text.pdf>.

The Iraqi Threat: The New Shi'i Arab Focus?

The Shi'ah of Iraq are the most important Shi'i community in the Arab East because they are a majority of Iraq's population and of the Arab Shi'ah in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, they control Shi'ism's holiest centers at Najaf and Karbala. If there is ever any pan-Shi'i movement in the Arab East, it is more likely to be led by the Shi'ah of Iraq than directed from Iran. Shi'i Arab Iraq, with its concentration of holy sites, religious scholarship and its cultural heritage, could be the pole of attraction for the other Arab Shi'ah that will either mobilize them in support of the claimed Iranian-led Shi'i alliance or, quite possibly, against Iranian hegemony. Similarly, Shi'i Arab Iraq could either guide the other Arab Shi'ah towards integration into their respective nation-states, or could stimulate them to rebel against their Sunni Arab rulers and struggle for political power.

For the moment, the role of Shi'i Arabs beyond Iraq's borders is constrained by that country's intense violence. How the current conflict in Iraq is eventually resolved will to a significant extent determine the impact that the Iraqi Shi'i Arabs will have on the Middle East. There can be no "Shi'i crescent" without the Iraqi Shi'i Arabs. Yet, given the structural importance of the Iraqi Shi'i Arabs, and their sometimes ambivalent attitudes towards Iran, no "Shi'i crescent" may be possible with them.

The modern history of the Arab Shi'i majority in Iraq following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire has been shaped by three forces: rebellion, oppression and cooptation.[16] The Ottomans regarded the Iraqi Shi'ah with suspicion given their faith and their location on the border between the Ottoman Empire, which was Sunni, and its rival, Persia, which was Shi'i. The largely Shi'i provinces of southeastern Ottoman Iraq were generally administered by Sunni Arabs, who often maltreated the Shi'ah and alienated them from the state. The Shi'ah maintained their important shrines and holy places in Samarra, Kufa, Najaf and Karbala, but they were inferior subjects in a Sunni state.[17]

After centuries of oppressive Sunni Ottoman rule, the Shi'ah were handed the historic opportunity to rule Iraq following the British invasion during the First World War. However, following the British occupation, the Shi'ah declared a *jihad* (holy war) against the British and joined forces with Iraq's Sunni Arabs in 1920 to stage a revolt. The Shi'i rebels hope of establishing an Arab-Islamic state was dashed and the rebellion was put down.[18] To the dismay of the Shi'ah, the British handed power in Iraq back to the Sunni Arab minority and in 1921 appointed Faysal, the son of the Sherif of Mecca, as the first king of Iraq (1921-33).

[16] There are non-Arab Shi'ah in Iraq (Kurds and Turkomen) but they are not relevant to the sectarian issue.
[17] See, for example, S.H. Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) pp. 147-8 and *passim*.
[18] For a definitive study on Iraq's Shi'ah see Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). Also, Moshe Ma'oz, *Middle Eastern Minorities: Between Integration and Conflict*, Policy Papers No. 50 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1999), p.73 ff, executive summary available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=27>.

Sunni rule was characterized by repression and cooptation, a stance that the state found easy to enforce thanks to divisions inside the Shi'i community. During the reign of Faysal the Shi'i *mujtahids* (religious leaders) continued to adhere to the idea of a Shi'i Islamic state. Their political influence, however, was curbed by the government, which also adopted harsh measures against the Shi'i clergy from Iran who were settled in Najaf and Karbala.[19] At the same time, the Iraqi state gained the support of many Shi'i tribal leaders through providing economic benefits and political appointments, in particular as members of parliament. While the Shi'i leadership was divided between the coopted and the controlled, the broader Shi'i population experienced important social and economic change. An increasing number of Shi'ah moved into urban areas in search of work, particularly Baghdad. There they were exposed to the ideologies of Arab nationalism and Iraqi patriotism, in the main thanks to the state education system. Many of these recently urbanized Shi'ah became affiliated with political parties that had an all-Iraqi identity, parties that were socialist and secular, parties that detached these Shi'ah from their religious leaders. During the years of the monarchy (1921-58), more and more Shi'ah joined government and public sector employment. Some managed to become ministers, with a Shi'i, Salih Jabir, eventually rising to the post of prime minister in 1947.

The Shi'ah remained underrepresented despite these advances. This prompted leading Shi'i politicians to demand half of the portfolios in every royal cabinet, a similar share of civil service posts and of the officer corps, and as well as half of all government resources. They also objected to the pan-Arab nature of state-sponsored Iraqi nationalism as they felt that it downplayed Iraqi Arabism.

Faysal's death in 1933, the year after Iraq's independence, was followed by a period of political instability and military coups. Growing incitement by Shi'i opposition leaders encouraged Shi'i tribes to agitate against the government in 1935, with some Shi'ah resorting to uprisings in the middle Euphrates region and in Iraq's south that were suppressed by the Iraqi army and air force. The risings and demonstrations did, however, yield a government concession in the form of increased representation of Shi'i tribal chiefs in parliament, even if Shi'i calls for parity with Sunnis in the government and civil service remained unanswered. The authorities were able to keep the Shi'ah quiescent because of intra-communal divisions and the lack of a strong political leader who could represent the community,[20] in part because the state neutralized the leadership ambitions of the *mujtahids*.

Despite these communal weaknesses and government policies, various Shi'i ministers, including Salih Jabir who was prime minister from March 1947 until January 1948, sought to recruit other Shi'ah to senior government positions.[21] However, leading Sunni Arab politicians acted to thwart what they suspected was a Shi'i bid for power. In 1951, Jabir's *Hizb al-Umma al-Ishtiraki* (Popular Socialist Party) became a predominantly Shi'i party for the first time. However, the prime minister of the day, Nuri as-Said, a Sunni, managed with the army's backing to outmaneuver both Jabir, his erstwhile ally, and Jabir's Shi'i followers.[22] The ability of the Sunnis to use the levers of power to exclude the Shi'ah from what they believed was their right to full political participation and socioeconomic mobility encouraged many young and educated Shi'ah to lean towards the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). The ICP stood for equality among Iraqi communities and opposed the incorporation of Iraq into Sunni-dominated pan-Arab structures.

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[19] Michael Eppel, *Iraq from Monarchy to Tyranny* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004) p.22-3; Ahmad Shakira, *Iraqi Politics 1921-1941* (London: LAAM Ltd, 1987), p.46-7; Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.101; Colonial Office, *Reports by His Majesty's Government to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq*, passim. In particular the report for 1925, pp. 162-5 and for 1928, pp. 180-6.

[20] See Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 62-5.

[21] Nakash, op.cit., p. 128.

[22] Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), p.104.

This political shift by the more active, younger Shi'ah to the revolutionary Left unintentionally helped to revive the political role of the *mujtahids*. The attraction of young Shi'ah to Communism was in part a rebellion against these traditional authority figures. The Shi'i clerics in Najaf and Karbala responded by making these holy cities centers of anti-Communism and Shi'i religious radicalism. The role of the clerics increased even while the prospects for the Shi'i community improved following the July 1958 revolution against the monarchy led by General ʻAbd al-Karim Qassem, with the help of his Communist allies.[23] Qassem, who was of Sunni, Shi'i and Kurdish descent, had two Shi'i officers in his revolutionary entourage. He abolished the monarchy and founded a republic. Qassem subsequently appointed a Shi'i and a Kurd to a three-member sovereignty council which also included a Sunni Arab as the president of the new Iraqi republic. Two Shi'ah also served as ministers in his cabinet, while other Shi'ah held important positions in the army and in ministries.[24]

In around 1958, Shi'i religious leaders formed the *Hizb al-Daʻwa al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Call Party) to combat Qassem's allegedly pro-Communist, anti-Islamic regime, and to establish an Islamic state in its stead.[25] Led by Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, a prominent Shi'i scholar, *Daʻwa* attracted poor Shi'i migrants in urban centers and young, educated Shi'ah who were disappointed with Qassem's republic. Whether it was Qassem (1958-63), the brief Baʻthist regime of 1963, the ʻArif brothers (1963-8), or the Baʻthists after 1968, the governments of the Iraqi republic disappointed many Shi'ah. Their policies were quasi-secular and non-Islamic, while the cabinets were often Sunni-dominated. All too often these regimes seemed to be repeating the approach of the monarchy to the Shi'ah, of coopting them rather than empowering them. A Shi'i senior officer, Naji Talib, served as prime minister for almost a year during the regime of ʻAbd al-Rahman ʻArif (1966-8), while another Shi'i was one of four deputy prime ministers. These measured smacked of tokenism to the Shi'ah, many of whom continued to move into urban centers, especially Baghdad, and to occupy lower-ranking positions in the civil service. For while there were visible Shi'i faces in the government, many middle and upper class Shi'ah lost much of their wealth after Qassem and subsequent regimes implemented land reform and nationalized private companies. Despite rising Shi'i employment in the public sector many Shi'ah were still receiving less state education than Sunnis.

The Arab Socialist Baʻth Party pushed these trends to extremes. The Shi'ah were coopted, integrated and savagely repressed. An unprecedented number of Shi'ah entered the Baʻth Party and the state, although the process had its setbacks in the 1960s and the 1990s. Two of the initial founders of the Baʻth in Iraq in 1948 were Shi'i—Fuʻad al-Rikabi and Saʻdun Hamadi. During the years that al-Rikabi served as a member of the Baʻth leadership (1950-63), the number of Shi'ah in the Iraqi branch of the Baʻth was fairly high thanks to his effective recruitment efforts: some 54 percent of the party was Shi'i between 1952 and 1963. Al-Rikabi became the only Baʻthist minister in Qassem's government in 1958, but he resigned from the cabinet the following year and was later ousted from the party. During the brief, and bloody period of Baʻthist rule in 1963, which was ended by a military coup, two out of the three rival Baʻthist factions were led by Shi'ah.

Although from 1952 until 1963 Shi'ah made up a little more than half of the regional Baʻth leadership, from late 1963 until the end of the decade Shi'i representation in party leadership plummeted to as low as 14

[23] On Qassem's rule see Uriel Dann, *Iraq Under Qassem: A Political History* (New York: Praeger, 1969).
[24] Dann, p. 43.
[25] On *Daʻwa* see Rodger Shanahan, "The Islamic Daʻwa party. Past developments and future prospects," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs,* Vol. 8, No. 2 (June 2004), pp. 16-25, available at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2004/issue2/jv8n2a2.html>. See also Graham E. Fuller, "Islamist politics in Iraq after Saddam Hussein," *USIP Special Report*, August 2003, available at <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr108.html>.

percent. However, after the Ba'th Party reclaimed power in 1968 there was a concerted effort to encourage the Shi'i masses to join the party. Thanks to this policy of Shi'i reintegration Shi'i representation rose again in three critical institutions: the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the highest party decision-making institution; the Regional Command, a rung below in the party; and the cabinet.[26] In addition, half of the rubber stamp parliament by 1987 was Shi'i. The one area where the Shi'ah were underrepresented was in the officer corps, where they held just thirteen percent of commissions—by contrast, some eighty percent of the privates were reckoned to be Shi'i. The Shi'ah were also underrepresented in the security services.

Shi'i Representation in Iraq (1977-87)

(percent of membership)

	1977	1987
Revolutionary Command Council	28	33
Regional Command	26	30
Cabinet	25	30

Source: Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq 1968-1989* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) pp. 11, 15, 19.

What is notable about the growing representation of the Shi'ah in the Ba'th and the government is that it occurred after Saddam Husayn took power in 1979. To an extent, this integration was another form of tokenism. The most senior positions were given to Sunni Arabs, notably Saddam's relatives. The bias towards Sunni Arabs reflected Saddam's suspicions about how loyal the Shi'ah ultimately were to the Iraqi state.

State rhetoric sought to smooth over these difficulties. Aiming to absorb more young Shi'ah into an Iraqi Arab national community and to forge a common Iraqi heritage and ethos, state propaganda for a while highlighted the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations as the origin of all Iraqis.[27] In addition, Saddam stressed the common values of Arab nationalism and culture, the unique role of Iraq in Arab and Islamic history, and the special bond between Shi'i and Sunni Arab tribes in Iraq. State economic development, fuelled by higher oil prices in the 1970s, also played a role in Ba'thist attempts to give the Shi'ah the impression that they were receiving a fair share of national wealth.

Saddam's endeavors to integrate the Shi'ah into Iraq's nation state might have been more successful had they not been interrupted by the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-8) and Operation Desert Storm in 1991. These events contributed to radicalizing Iraq's Shi'i Islamists, and to handing these Islamists the leadership of the Iraqi Shi'i Arab community. Saddam had always been wary of the Shi'i Islamists and his regime maintained tight security control in Shi'i populated areas. Any perceived threat was dealt with ruthlessly. In 1980, the Ba'thist regime executed Baqir as-Sadr along with other Shi'i religious leaders and hundreds of other Shi'ah. In addition, a large number of members of *Da'wa*, and other radical Shi'i organizations that had emerged, such as the *Fatimiyah* group (founded in 1964) and *al-Mujahidun* (the Holy Warriors, founded in 1979) were arrested, tortured, and deported.

The main source of inspiration for the radical Iraqi Shi'ah was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who upon his exile from Iran in 1964 had settled in Najaf. He remained there until he was expelled by Saddam Husayn in 1978. The Iraqi regime's deportation of Khomeini to France, from where he later returned in triumph to Iran in 1979, was a catalyst for Shi'i anti-Ba'thist protests and guerrilla attacks. Unsurprisingly, Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran was vengeful in its attitude to the Iraqi Ba'thist regime. In addition, the Islamic republic served as a model for Iraqi Shi'ah as to what their Islamic state could look like.

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[26] See Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq 1968-1989* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 11, 15, 19.
[27] Ibid, pp. 61-8.

The radical Shi'ah remained a minority and many secular Iraqi Shi'ah Arabs nonetheless continued to feel allegiance to the Iraqi Arab state, rejecting any notion of a pan-Shi'i merger with Islamic Iran.[28] This was particularly evident during the long and costly war between Iran and Iraq (1980-8) during which most Shi'i soldiers remained loyal to the Iraqi state and did not defect to the Iranian side, although some of this loyalty stemmed from fear of regime retribution.

The aftermath of Operation Desert Storm in 1991 proved to be a turning point for the Iraqi Shi'ah. The community divided following the defeat of the Iraqi army by the U.S.-led Coalition that was assembled to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and paid yet another high price. In the deep south of Iraq, the overwhelmingly Shi'i population erupted into armed rebellion, partly spontaneously and partly owing to U.S. and Iranian incitement. The Shi'ah took temporary control of several towns and cities, including Najaf and Karbala, and executed, or drove out, many government and Ba'thist officials. In addition, Iranian-trained Iraqi Shi'ah, organized by the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), joined the rising. SCIRI was led by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who had lived in exile in Iran since the early 1980s.

The large Shi'i population of Baghdad, which peacefully coexisted with its Sunni neighbors, did not join the 1991 uprising. The reticence of the Baghdad Shi'ah was partly out of fear of the regime, but it illustrated the continuing divisions in the Iraqi Shi'i community. The 1991 revolt was unorganized and lacked clear leadership and political goals, aside from wishing to overthrow Saddam's regime. The rebels were also up against a determined regime that used extraordinary force against them. Moreover, the rebels were isolated. The United States and the Arab states objected to any internal Iraqi political developments that might lead to the dismemberment of Iraq.[29]

The Shi'i community was devastated by the suppression of the 1991 uprising. Saddam's troops reportedly killed some 300,000 Shi'ah and forced some half a million Shi'ah out of the ancient marshes of southern Iraq. Many Shi'ah fled abroad, especially to Iran.[30] Repression of the now highly suspect Shi'i population continued into the 1990s, with the regime killing civilians in retaliation for Shi'i guerilla attacks on regime targets. The regime also resorted to assassination, murdering several important Shi'i clerics and their sons, including those uninvolved in politics, such as Sayed Muhammad Taqi al-Khoei, Ayatollah Shaykh Murtada al-Burujerdi and Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq as-Sadr (the father of Muqtada as-Sadr).[31]

For a while following 1991, Shi'i representation in Ba'thist structures and the state was drastically reduced. The level of representation slowly started to recover, particularly in lower ranking positions, including in the deep south of Iraq, but it never regained the levels of the 1980s. Cooptation had run its course.

The vicious repression of the 1991 uprising had a galvanizing effect on Saddam's opponents, Shi'i Arab, Kurdish and Sunni Arab alike. The opposition attempted to form a united front under the aegis of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), founded in 1992 with its headquarters in the Kurdish safe haven that emerged from the 1991 Kurdish rebellion against Saddam. However, the opposition to Saddam was divided, with the Shi'i opponents of the regime ideologically at odds with each other and taking different approaches to the United States, the INC's sponsor. The Shi'i Islamist opposition

[28] Nakash, op.cit., pp. 137-8; Hana Batatu, "Iraq's underground Sh'ia movement: Characteristics, Causes and Prospects, *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 35 (Summer 1981), pp. 578-94.

[29] For more on U.S. policy towards Iraq during these years, see Daniel L. Byman, "After the Storm: U.S. Policy towards Iraq since 1991," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 4. (Winter, 2000-2001), p.498 and Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: U.S. Regime Change Efforts and Post-Saddam Governance" (Updated), *Congressional Research Service*, February 23, 2004, p. 6, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/31340.pdf>.

[30] Graham E. Fuller and Rend R. Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 104.

[31] See "Shia Leadership," *GlobalSecurity.org*, n.d., available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/religion-shia2.htm>.

was led by the mostly Iran-based SCIRI and *Da'wa*. SCIRI also had an armed wing, the Iranian-trained Badr Brigade, that the Americans regarded with suspicion. Despite its strong Iranian ties, SCIRI did speak to the United States. *Da'wa* was more reserved in its attitude to the United States, preferring to develop strong links to Iran. Shi'i secularists operated as part of the INC. Ahmad Chalabi, a secular Shi'i exile and leader of the INC, established close ties with Washington and wooed the Americans to invade Iraq in 2003.

In April 2003 the United States toppled Saddam's regime, doing what the Shi'i Islamists had tried and failed to do for decades. The Shi'i Islamists, who remained passive during the 2003 war, quickly returned to Iraq after the Americans had done the hard work of defeating Saddam's army. When they did, they found themselves empowered by the United States, but also distrusted by the United States for their close Iranian links.

For two years after the overthrow of Saddam, the United States sought to cultivate mostly secular Shi'ah in the new Iraq and sought to marginalize the more popular Shi'i Islamist movements. Shi'i leaders, including the widely respected, Iranian-born Sistani, who had long lived in Najaf, were not consulted by the Americans. These Shi'i leaders rejected the interim constitution of 2004, the Transitional Administrative Law, which proclaimed Iraq a federal state and gave veto powers to its minorities. Sistani and other Shi'i leaders demanded direct elections to a representative national assembly in a unified Iraq, a body that would appoint a government and prepare a constitution to safeguard Iraq's Islamic character and respect the rights of all religions and sects.[32]

Despite their problems with the Americans, the Shi'i Islamists and clerical establishment were inclined to cooperate with them. By contrast, the young aggressive Shi'i leader, Muqtada as-Sadr, vehemently opposed the U.S. presence in Iraq. The son of the murdered cleric Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq as-Sadr, Muqtada as-Sadr formed the *Jama'at as-Sadr al-Thani* (Association of the Second Sadr) and the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (Army of the Mahdi). Muqtada as-Sadr initiated two uprisings against American and Iraqi forces during 2004, and he repeatedly defied the Iraqi government.[33] Babak Rahimi has written that Muqtada as-Sadr:

> enjoys a cult-like following among Shi'i masses in poorer urban regions like Kut and Sadr city, the Sadrist phenomenon evolved from a nascent millenarian movement into a full-blown political organization in the two years between 2003 and 2005. Much of the rapid growth in popularity of groups like the Sadrists lies in the anti-occupation sentiment that has rapidly intensified, mostly in the poorer sector of the Shi'i population (especially in Sadr city), which has long felt excluded by the Sunni rulers in Baghdad.[34]

The divisions in the Shi'i community and the attack on them by al-Qa'ida and the former Ba'thists, forces that fought against the U.S. presence in Iraq from its first day, held back the newly empowered Shi'ah. As a result, the Shi'ah hold formal power but with only limited influence, an influence that furthermore is extremely dependent upon the U.S. presence. Among the Shi'i leaders killed since the fall of Saddam was Baqir al-Hakim, the leader of SCIRI who was assassinated in August 2003. He was replaced by his younger brother, 'Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim. Shi'i Islamist groups such as SCIRI and secular Shi'i politicians such as interim prime minister Iyad Allawi endeavored to reduce, if not eliminate, Muqtada as-Sadr's influence, while also struggling with the Sunni insurgency. However, Sistani, aware of

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[32] Nakash, op.cit., pp. 146-8, 154; David Rieff, "The Shi'ite Surge," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2004, available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C06E1D71738F932A35751C0A9629C8B6>.
[33] On Muqtada as-Sadr see Nimrod Raphaeli, "Understanding Muqtada al-Sadr," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. XI, No. 4 (Fall 2004), pp. 33-42, available at <http://www.meforum.org/article/655>; International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabilizer?*, Middle East Report 55 (July 11, 2006), available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4210>.
[34] Babak Rahimi, "Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Ba'athist Iraq," USIP Special report No. 187, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, June 2007), p. 2, available at <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr187.pdf>.

the historic cost of Shi'i disunity, has used his influence to integrate Muqtada as-Sadr into the political process and Sadrist candidates participated in the January 2005 elections. Largely boycotted by Sunnis and threatened by Sunni insurgents, the turnout was just fifty eight percent, these elections for Iraq's transitional assembly gave a majority to the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a Shi'i bloc that included SCIRI, *Da'wa*, the Sadrists and other small Shi'i Islamist parties such as *Fadila* (Virtue).[35] Of the 140 UIA deputies, there were 23 Sadrists. The Shi'i sweep of the elections was not limited to the national parliament. In the elections for the municipal councils, Shi'i parties gained control over eleven councils (out of eighteen up for grabs), including Baghdad.[36]

Iraq Transitional Assembly
(Elected January 30, 2005)

List	Seats
United Iraqi Alliance	140
Kurdistan Alliance	75
Iraqi List	40
Total inc other	275

Source: Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, "Provisional Results Results for 6 Governorates, Kurdistan Assembly and Transitional National Assembly," February 13, 2005, available at <http://www.ieciraq.org/Results/ProvResult13_02_2005.pdf>; Education for Peace in Iraq Center, "January 2005 Election Results (PDF)," n.d., available at <http://www.epic-usa.org/Portals/1/UpdatedElectionResults.pdf>.

Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, leader of *Da'wa*, became the interim prime minister, while Jalal Talabani, the leader of the Kurdish Alliance, was elevated to the presidency. A Sunni Arab, Hachem al-Hassani, became the speaker of the new parliament. Ja'fari was unable to form a stable coalition. The Kurds resented Ja'fari's refusal to allow the Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, to take control of the oil-rich Kirkuk district and his efforts to restrict the powers of President Talabani. Sunnis objected to his endeavors to dismiss Ba'thists from state administration, and his failure to stop retaliatory attacks by Shi'i militias against Sunnis. The United States was suspicious of Ja'fari's close ties to Iran, and backed the demand of the newly-formed Kurdish-Sunni Arab alliance to depose him from the premiership. SCIRI, the largest element in the UIA, objected from the start to the nomination of Ja'fari as prime minister given his rivalry with its leader 'Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim.

In December 2005, after the approval of the new permanent constitution, elections were conducted for the new parliament (the Council of Representatives) of 275 members, of whom 25 percent were to be women.[37] The turnout rose to seventy percent thanks to increased Sunni Arab participation. In particular, a Sunni Islamist list, the *Jab'at al-Tawafuq al-Iraqiyya* (the Iraqi Accord Front), came in third in terms of the number of seats. By contrast, Iyad Allawi's largely Shi'i secularist Iraqi National List was pushed into fourth place.[38]

Iraqi Council of Representatives
(Elected December 15, 2005)

List	Seats
United Iraqi Alliance	128
Kurdistan Alliance	53
Jab'at al-Tawafuq al-Iraqiyya	44
Iraqi National List	25
Total inc other	275

Source: Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, Certification of the Council of Representatives Elections Final Results, February 10, 2006, available at <http://www.ieciraq.org/final%20cand/IECI_Decision_Certified_Results_of_CoR_Elections_En.pdf>.

[35] For the full list of Iraqi parties and factions see Glen Rangwala, "Iraq's major political groupings," *MiddleEastReference.org.uk*, n.d., available at <http://middleeastreference.org.uk/iraqiopposition.html>.
[36] Nakash, op.cit., p. 156.
[37] For more on the Iraqi constitution see Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Elections, Constitution, and Government," (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 26, 2007, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/80240.pdf>. The text of the constitution is available at <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/20704/11332732681iraqi_constitution_en.pdf/iraqi_constitution_en.pdf>.
[38] Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, "Certification of the Council of Representatives Elections Final Results," February 10, 2006, available at <http://www.ieciraq.org/final%20cand/IECI_Decision_Certified_Results_of_CoR_Elections_En.pdf>.

The UIA selected Ja'fari to be its nominee for the post of permanent prime minister with a four year term in February 2006. Ja'fari gained the UIA nomination by a margin of one vote thanks to the support of Muqtada as-Sadr's faction, but his continued tenure in power was controversial. After months of stalemate, during which he refused to yield to pressures to step aside, he eventually resigned in May 2006 under the inducement of Sistani. Ja'fari was replaced by Nuri al-Maliki, also from *Da'wa*. Maliki won wide support in the parliament, including from Muqtada as-Sadr's faction.[39]

Maliki, like his predecessors, faces enormous and seemingly endless challenges, first among which is the violent Sunni-Shi'i conflict in Iraq. Despite the participation of many Sunni Arabs in the December 2005 elections and the incorporation of Sunni Arabs ministers in the Maliki government, intense Sunni-Shi'i violence continues unabated. The conflict involves more than militias fighting each other, with largely Ba'thist Sunni insurgents up against Shi'i militants from SCIRI's Iranian-trained Badr Brigade. It is a war in which civilians, including women and children, and mosques are considered legitimate targets. Iraqi Sunni insurgents initiated anti-Shi'i, and anti-U.S. terrorism, a task in which they were assisted by non-Iraqi Sunni Arabs such as the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qa'ida leader in Iraq. Zarqawi declared a "full-scale war" against Iraq's Shi'ah in October 2005. The violence escalated considerably following the Sunni bombing of the Shi'i shrine in Samara in February 2006, to which Shi'i militias responded by escalating their anti-Sunni terrorism.[40]

Although the United States successfully killed Zarqawi in June 2006, sectarian violence persists. Whether or not the violence will lead to an all-out civil war is unclear, but what is evident is that the conflict is likely to be prolonged because of the clash of Sunni-Shi'i attitudes. The Sunni insurgents are unable to adjust to the fact that the Shi'ah, whom they consider to be their inferiors and not to be genuine Muslims, have now assumed power in Iraq. For their part, the Shi'ah believe that they are fully entitled to dominate Iraq because they are a long persecuted majority community.

Only a full national agreement between all sides and a U.S. withdrawal can end the violence. That agreement will have to incorporate the Sunni insurgents and will have to assuage Sunni grievances regarding: the August 2005 permanent constitution, the definition of the Iraqi state and its relation to Islam, the nature of Iraqi federalism and of Kurdish autonomy, the equitable distribution of natural resources, and relations with the United States. Although many of these points were covered in a twenty-eight point plan for national reconciliation announced by prime minister Maliki plan in June 2006, little progress has been made.

The conundrum for Iraq is the U.S. presence. As long as U.S. troops remain, Sunni Arab insurgents are likely to continue their attacks, but if U.S. forces leave before a national political agreement, or in the context of an agreement that does not include the Sunni Arab insurgents, then these insurgents will be tempted to intensify the violence. Similarly, while the Iraqi government has been training new security forces, it will take time, and U.S. assistance, to make them effective.

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[39] Ofra Bengio, "Coalition-building in Iraq: Mission Impossible?," Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, No. 169, May 14, 2006, available <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/tanotes/TAUnotes169.doc>.

[40] See for example "If Iraq breaks apart (III)," *Bitterlemons-International.org*, Vol. 4, Ed. 12, March 30, 2006 available at <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=126>; Bernard Haykel, "Among jihadis, a rift over suicide attacks," *International Herald Tribune*, October 12, 2005, available at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/10/11/opinion/edhaykel.php>; Edward Wong and Dexter Filkins, "In An About-Face, Sunnis Want U.S. to Remain in Iraq," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2006, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/17/world/middleeast/17sunnis.html?ex=1310788800&en=ad23cba355e3761e&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>.

The Western Wing of the "Shi'i Crescent": Syria and Lebanon

Lebanon and Syria, the "western wing" of the so-called Shi'i crescent, is far from coherent or tightly linked to Iran. Syria's Shi'i connection with Iran is limited and problematic, and the core of its strategic alliance with Tehran is the struggle against Israel. This alliance, that also includes Hizballah, can be dismantled if Syria and Israel reach a peace agreement, or if Hizballah is disarmed following its July-August 2006 war with Israel.

The 'Alawis in Syria: The Problematic Shi'i Connection

In contrast to the Shi'ah in Lebanon, and further illustrative of how the Ottoman state treated Shi'i, and Shi'i-affiliated, communities differently according to the location, the 'Alawis of northwestern Syria were brutally persecuted by the Sunni Ottoman authorities. The largely Sunni population of Syria has rejected the 'Alawis almost continuously since the 'Alawis settled in Jabal Ansariyya (around Latakia) during the tenth century. In addition to what was considered to be their unruly behavior, which incurred state displeasure, the 'Alawis were picked out for systematic maltreatment because many Sunnis considered them to be either heretics or infidels.

A typical anti-'Alawi ruling came from Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya, the prominent Sunni *'alim* (religious scholar) from Syria. Issued in 1305, his *fatwa* (legal opinion) stated that "This people known as Nusayriyya…are greater infidels than the Jews and the Christians…they pretend before the Muslims that they are Shi'is… the trouble is that they do not believe in God or the Prophet." Similar Sunni hostility to the 'Alawis was expressed by Shaykh al-Dimashki in a *fatwa* issued in 1516, during the Ottoman-era of Syrian history.[41]

This religious hostility was overlaid with a Sunni sense that the 'Alawis were also culturally inferior. In addition to Sunni hostility, the 'Alawis also received Shi'i disdain. Shi'i scholars termed the 'Alawis *ghulat* (exaggerators) and so outside of mainstream Shi'ism.[42] The 'Alawis responded by terming the Sunnis heretics and the Shi'ah as deficient in their faith. Consequently, the 'Alawis were a poor, socially and culturally marginalized community in Syria until as recently as the 1950s.

The position of the 'Alawis in Syria changed courtesy of the French, who put the 'Alawis in a position to assert themselves over the long-term. The French Mandatory authorities promoted the 'Alawis as a counterweight to

[41] Quoted in Yvette Talhami, *The Nusayriya Uprising in Syria in the 19th Century*, Ph.D. Thesis, Haifa University, Haifa, 2006, pp. 53, 57. See also Yaron Friedman, "al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi: A Historical Biography of the Founder of the Nusayri-'Alawite Sect," *Studia Islamica*, No. 93 (2001), pp. 91.

[42] For a detailed study see Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-Alawis between Sunna and Imami Shi'ia in the Middle East—Hostility, Indulgence and Apologetics According to Medieval and Modern Arabic Texts,* Ph.D. thesis, Sorbonne University, Paris, 2005. See also Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism" in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987) p. 238. Also available online at <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Alawis.htm>.

the Sunni Arab nationalists. The French granted the ʻAlawis autonomy, establishing an ʻAlawi "state" in 1922, and developed the ʻAlawi region's economic infrastructure. They also recruited many young ʻAlawi men to the *Troupes spéciales du Levant*, a corps of local shock troops and the most effective segment of the newly created Syrian armed forces, which gave the ʻAlawi community control of an important lever of political power. Control of the means of violence eventually put the Syrian ʻAlawis in a position where they dominated the senior military positions of the newly independent Syria in 1946. The Baʻth Party, the main ideological vehicle for these ʻAlawi officers, took power in a coup in 1963, and following internal coups in 1966 and 1970, an ʻAlawi air force officer, Hafiz al-Asad became Syria's dictator.

The difficulty the ʻAlawis consistently faced was how to define who they were. For centuries, the ʻAlawis in Syria were isolated—they were considered heretics by the Sunnis and shunned by the Shi'ah. In the new context of a modern state, a Syria under French mandate, some ʻAlawi leaders and intellectuals chose a particularist identity that stressed a connection to Shi'ism without adopting all of Shi'i Islam's tenets. They began calling themselves ʻAlawi, thereby evoking the name of ʻAli the founder of Shi'ism, rather than Nusayri, a label with implications of heresy. To stress their adherence to Islam, even of an idiosyncratic variety, they subsequently adopted the label "Muslim ʻAlawis." They also created ties with Lebanese Shi'i scholars, and adopted the Shi'i Jaʻfari religious law into their newly established ʻAlawi judicial system.

The ʻAlawi community for the most part did not support this decision to seek cover under the cloak of Shi'ism. Instead, a larger group of ʻAlawis opted for integration into the Arab nation and Syrian society as equal citizens, rather than take the French-sponsored path of autonomy. They proclaimed the ʻAlawis to be pure Arabs and true Shi'i Muslims, neither a separate group nor an adjunct of the Shi'ah. The main political vehicles through which they pursued this agenda were modernizing, nationalist parties that were inspired by European fascist movements, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Baʻth Party.[43] These parties had attractive secular and social agendas that sought to provide minorities such as the ʻAlawis, Druze and Christians with equality with the Sunni Arab majority in Syria.[44] Military officers proved particularly susceptible to this message.

The ʻAlawi desire for integration, the Arabising agenda of the majority of Syrian ʻAlawis and their leaders who controlled the Syrian state as of the internal coup of 1966, failed to win over most Syrian Sunni Arabs. The secular and socialist policies of the ʻAlawi-led Baʻthist regime offended many Sunni Arabs and damaged their economic interests. The result was that by the late 1970s the Sunni Arab majority in Syria was profoundly alienated from the ʻAlawi-led regime, a regime that proclaimed its Arab nationalism at every opportunity. The most potent forces in this Sunni Arab rejection were the Sunni clergy, the *ʻulama*, and the Muslim Brotherhood, who depicted the ʻAlawi-Baʻthist regime as "godless," "heretical" and "sectarian."[45] The anti-ʻAlawi campaign, which began with demonstrations against the atheism of the Baʻth ideology in the late 1960s, turned violent after Syria's intervention in the Lebanese civil war in 1976. A near civil war raged in Syria until 1982 when the ʻAlawi-led state sent the Syrian army to crush the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in the city of Hama, claiming 20,000 lives, many of them innocent civilians. For over twenty years there was little anti-regime agitation in Syria until the most recent Kurdish unrest around Qamishli in 2004 which the regime brutally suppressed.[46]

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[43] For a comprehensive study on the Baʻth, see John T. Devlin, *The Baʻth Party. A History from its Origins to 1966* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1976).

[44] Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) pp. 520-5; Fadi Nahhas, *The Alawis in Syria: Between Separatism and Nationalism, 1920-1946*, M.A. Thesis, Haifa University, Haifa, 1998.

[45] Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: the Sphinx of Damascus* (London and New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988) pp. 150, 153.

[46] Ma'oz, op.cit., pp. 149-63; Gary C. Gambill, "The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 6 No. 4 (April 2004), available <http://www.meib.org/articles/0404_s1.htm>; David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 188.

Given the Sunni Arabs' unremitting rejection of the 'Alawis, the 'Alawi-led Syrian regime sought to gain Shi'i credentials for itself. In 1973, eighty 'Alawi religious figures issued a joint proclamation that stated that the 'Alawis were Twelver Shi'ah who adhered to the teachings of 'Ali and the Quran. Similarly, in 1973 the leading Shi'i imam in Lebanon, Musa as-Sadr, who was president of that country's Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council, confirmed that the 'Alawis were doctrinally as one with the Shi'ah.[47] In the early 1980s, as the 'Alawi regime fended off the violent Sunni Arab rebellion, the newly installed Islamic Republic of Iran provided verbal support, adding to the notion that the 'Alawis are Shi'ah. This policy continued after the death in 2000 of Hafiz al-Asad and his replacement by his son Bashar al-Asad. Significantly, several Shi'i clerics from Iran and Lebanon have been invited to deliver sermons in 'Alawi villages, while young 'Alawi men have been sent to attend Shi'i seminaries in Iran in recent years.[48] Increasing numbers of Iranian Shi'i pilgrims have visited the Shi'i shrine of Zaynab, the daughter of 'Ali, in Damascus, as have Iraqi Shi'i exiles living in Syria.

How much good this rhetorical posturing and these religious rulings have done to enhance the legitimacy of the 'Alawi-led regime in Syria, or in the Middle East more broadly, is unclear. If anything, by claiming to be Shi'i, the Syrian 'Alawis have only confirmed the hostility of Syria's Sunni Arab majority. Sunni Arab regimes elsewhere in the Middle East, such as in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, are hardly attracted to the notion of supporting a Shi'i regime in Damascus. Nor does the claim of a Shi'i identity compensate Iraq's Shi'i Arabs for Damascus's backing for Saddam Husayn in 2003 and the losses that they have suffered at the hands of Sunni Arab fighters that Syria has supported since then. As for Damascus' association with Muqtada as-Sadr, the militant Shi'i Iraqi leader, this derives mainly from their common anti-Americanism rather than from any Shi'i connection.

The Syrian regime's survival strategy is based not on rhetoric but *realpolitik*. Syria's most credible allies are Iran and Hizballah, because of common strategic interests and not their alleged shared Shi'ism. Each needs the other to fend off what is seen as a U.S.-Israeli attempt to erode their respective positions, whether by pushing Syria out of Lebanon, imposing sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program or encouraging the Lebanese government to disarm Hizballah. The formation of a "common front" between Iran and Syria was announced after Syrian troops were obliged to leave Lebanon in April 2005, a front that was solidified by the Iranian-Syrian military pact of June 2006.

At the same time, the Syrian regime knows that it has to spread its bets, which is why it is careful that the Shi'i element of the regime's identity is not so prominent that it alienates the Sunni states. Damascus still needs countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey to advocate on its behalf, despite having been at loggerheads with them in the past. Such connections enable Damascus to fend off U.S. and UN pressure, particularly over the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, a murder in which Syria is deeply implicated. These ties with moderate states do not mean that Syria has adopted a moderate policy, but that it is seeking the cover that these moderate states can provide as well as a fall back option should its alliance with Hizballah and Iran prove too costly. For Syria, state interest is a more important guide than its supposed role in the "Shi'i crescent."

[47] Hanna Batatu, *Syrian Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 20; Kramer, op.cit.
[48] Eyal Ziser, *In the Name of the Father: Bashar Asad's First Years in Power* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, Israel: Tel Aviv Univerity Press, 2003), p. 73. Kramer, op.cit., p. 251.

The Unique Transformation of Lebanon's Shi'ah

The Shi'ah in Lebanon have had a unique experience in the Arab Middle East, that makes them remarkably different from the Shi'ah elsewhere in the region. Although historically discriminated against, the Lebanese Shi'ah did not suffer the extent of persecution of other Shi'i communities. Unlike the Shi'ah of Iraq, they have consistently participated in national politics for many generations, initially through their feudal chiefs but more recently through their popular movements such as Amal and Hizballah. As a result, although a minority in Lebanon, they have been transformed from a passive, divided and "dispossessed" population into a politically mobile, vigorous and assertive community. Not only have the Lebanese Shi'ah become the most powerful social and military force in Lebanon, they have successfully challenged the United States (in 1983-4), and Israel (1983-2000 and again in 2006). The Lebanese Shi'ah have a crucial influence on their country's future, greater perhaps than any other community.

The Lebanese Shi'ah benefited from the fact that the Ottoman state was not anti-Shi'i across the board. Indeed, the Ottomans allowed Shi'i communities in Lebanon to be treated with rather greater respect than the Shi'ah of Iraq, with important long-term consequences. Settling in the region in the tenth century, the Shi'ah established an important religious center in Jabal 'Amil (today's southern Lebanon) that helped to advance Shi'i teaching.[49] In the end, the Shi'i faith established also itself in the Biqa'a valley of eastern Lebanon. During the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, several Shi'i families, notably the Harfush, played an important role in the region around the Biqa'a valley town of Baalbek as tax collectors and local governors for the Ottomans. On occasion, they even challenged Ottoman feudal chiefs. By 1861 the Ottomans brought them under some form of control, with one Shi'i delegate sitting in the newly established administrative council of the autonomous *mutasariflik* (district) of Mount Lebanon (which did not include Jabal 'Amil).

The historical trend of the Lebanese Shi'ah is that they were always a part of the state, even if with inferior status. They were beneath the Sunnis, as were non-Muslims, and in a sense had a lesser position than the Christians as they did not have the official status of a separate religious community. The French altered this historical trajectory when they occupied Lebanon in 1918 and then, with Maronite Christian encouragement, created an enlarged Lebanon in 1920. Many Shi'ah initially rejected the new political configuration largely because it represented Maronite and French hegemony. The French, however, managed to win them over by giving Shi'i leaders political-administrative appointments, especially in the proxy parliament, the Representative Council. Moreover, in 1926 the Shi'ah were given the status of a recognized religious community with their own autonomous legal system.[50] The French policy worked. Unlike the Lebanese Sunnis, most Shi'ah backed the 1926 Lebanese constitution and the 1936 Franco-Lebanese treaty that was supposed to make Lebanon an independent state after a three-year transition period.

The growing crisis in Europe and the Second World War delayed Lebanese independence. As the Lebanese prepared for the eventual departure of the French, the country's leaders assembled in 1943 to agree an informal power sharing arrangement, the unwritten National Pact. The Shi'ah, who were around 20 percent of Lebanon's population according to the 1932 census, were assigned the position of the speaker of parliament and proportional representation in parliament and the public administration. Although this put the Shi'ah in third place in Lebanon's pecking order, after the Maronites who took the presidency and the Sunnis who took the prime ministership, it nonetheless further consolidated the Shi'i role in Lebanon's power structure.

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[49] Philip K. Hitti, *Lebanon in History* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1957) p. 411.
[50] Meir Zamir, *The Formation of Modern Lebanon* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 68, 190 and *passim.*

The socioeconomic condition of the Shi'ah, however, remained underdeveloped. The French, and then the Maronite-dominated independent Lebanon, along with the feudal notables (*zu'ama*) and religious leaders of the Shi'i community, showed little interest in ensuring that the Shi'ah received their fair share in terms of health and educational services. As the Lebanese economy started to change, many poor Shi'ah migrated from their countryside and their small towns to Beirut where they became an economically marginal group. Some went abroad, in particular to West Africa. As the Lebanese economy developed, some of these Shi'ah, bereft of political leadership that could meet their socio-economic needs, began supporting national, secular or socialist parties that promised to create a non-sectarian and egalitarian society.

These stirrings in a community that was experiencing rapid social and economic change called for the sort of dynamic leadership that traditional forces were unable to provide. That leadership finally emerged in the charismatic figure of Musa as-Sadr.[51] An imam born in Qom, Iran, a key center of Shi'i learning, Musa as-Sadr arrived in Lebanon in 1959. A decade later in 1969, over the objections of other Shi'i clerics and lay leaders, he established and became the first head of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council. Musa as-Sadr's institution building continued in 1974 when he created the Movement of the Disinherited. The following year, with Lebanon descending into civil war, he set up its militia, the *afwaj al-muqawama al-lubnaniya* (Battalions of the Lebanese Resistance), best known by the acronym "Amal" which means "hope" in Arabic. These institutions allowed the Shi'i community to have an identity independent of the Sunni tutelage that had historically been exercised over them. Furthermore, Musa as-Sadr created vehicles that cultivated the religious-cultural identity of the Shi'ah and promoted a sense of self-confidence and political power. The Lebanese civil war (1975-90), Syria's military intervention in Lebanon in 1976, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and the Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon (1982-2000), contributed greatly to radicalizing the Lebanese Shi'ah and deepening their sense of self-reliance.[52]

Musa as-Sadr did not live to see the long-term effects of his institution-building. He disappeared in 1978 while visiting Libya. His unexplained removal from the political scene remains a political issue for the Lebanese Shi'ah. Without Musa as-Sadr, Amal developed into a socio-political movement. Led since 1980 by Nabih Berri, a Shi'i lawyer who was born in West Africa, Amal largely represents the interests of the Shi'i secular middle class and articulates their desire to fully integrate into Lebanese society and receive a fair share of political power and the socio-economic cake.

Amal's leadership of the Lebanese Shi'ah proved to be short-lived. Radical Shi'i Islamists, inspired by the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution, put forward a substantially different agenda to integration: the establishment of a Lebanese Shi'i Islamic state along the lines of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[53] Instead of seeking to be a part of Lebanon, these Islamists wanted the Shi'ah to transform Lebanon. Mostly clerics, these radical Shi'i Islamists began in separate organizations. One cleric, Husayn al-Musawi, broke away from Amal to found *al-Amal al-Islami* (Islamic Amal). A more important cluster formed around Muhammad Fadlallah, an Iraqi-born cleric and his Lebanese Shi'i followers, who had studied in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf and had been associated with *Da'wa*, Iraq's oldest Shi'i Is-

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[51] For a comprehensive study see Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam, Musa al-Sadr and the Shi'a of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

[52] For full discussions see Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon* (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1993) pp. 179ff; Tabitha Petran, *The Struggle Over Lebanon* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987) pp. 119ff; Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1983* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984) pp. 34ff; Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "Factors conducive to the politicization of the Lebanese Shi'a and the emergence of Hizbu'llah," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (September 2003), pp. 287-321.

[53] For elaborate reviews see Hanf, op.cit., pp. 315-8; Fuller and Francke, op.cit., pp. 212ff; Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 113ff. For a good study on Amal see Augustus R. Norton, *Amal and The Shi'a: The Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987).

lamist party. In 1982 these clerics founded Hizballah. The new party was to be led by a secretary-general and guided by a clerical *Shura* (consultation) council. The first secretary-general was Shaykh Subhi Tufayli, who was succeeded in 1991 by Abbas al-Musawi. Following al-Musawi's assassination by Israel in February 1992, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah took over, and he has led the organization ever since. Well-organized and with extensive Iranian support, Hizballah scored important military successes against Israel and the United States. Hizballah's role as the main Lebanese force fighting against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon meant that its popularity among the Lebanese Shi'ah soon eclipsed that of its secular, moderate, and less combative rival, Amal. Competition between the two groups turned violent from 1987 to 1989, leading to hundreds of casualties. An Amal-Hizballah truce was reached in 1990 thanks to Iranian and Syrian mediation, with Hizballah clearly having the upper hand.

Although Hizballah came out of the Lebanese civil war as the main military-political force among the Lebanese Shi'ah, Amal's position was maintained because of Berri's greater willingness to be politically pragmatic. Amal secured a significant political advantage when Berri agreed to participate in the post-civil war configuration created by the 1989 Ta'if accord brokered in Saudi Arabia, an agreement that amended the 1943 National Pact to the benefit of the now majority Muslim communities. Ta'if aimed to gradually end Lebanon's institutional sectarianism. In the interim, however, sectarianism was to be reformed and restored. Shi'i representation in the Lebanese cabinet increased to five ministers from one pre-civil war (two are from Amal, two are from Hizballah and one is a Shi'i independent, Fawzi Falluh, who leans towards Hizballah). In parliament the number of Shi'i deputies rose to 27 out of a total of 128 (12 Hizballah, 11 Amal and 4 independents), compared to a pre-Ta'if allocation of 17 out of 99 seats. The Shi'ah also received more posts in the bureaucracy and more resources were allocated to Shi'i localities. Amal, although not the most powerful Shi'i force, for a while became the community's most prominent political representative. Berri became the speaker of parliament and enjoyed wider authority in this post than his Shi'i predecessors. He also became a member of Lebanon's governing "troika" with the Maronite president and the Sunni prime minister.

Hizballah, fresh from its military besting of Amal, initially rejected the Ta'if accord as it divided parliament equally between Christians and Muslims, despite reweighting the Muslim representation towards the Shi'ah and away from the Sunnis. Still committed to its Islamist ideological aim of a Lebanese Islamic republic, Hizballah regarded Ta'if as a document of excessive compromise, especially given Hizballah's continued role fighting the Israelis. However, Hizballah was constrained to alter its stance because of its two protectors, Iran and Syria. The Syrian government backed Ta'if, while Iranian policy, following the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, was less ideologically driven.

The availability of Amal as a counterweight and the practical difficulty of overturning Lebanese sectarianism meant that Hizballah changed tack and adopted a less confrontational policy. Hizballah decided to work within the system alongside other communities, including the Christian sects, to gradually change Lebanon's sectarian structure through education and dialogue.[54] In coordination with Amal, Hizballah participated in all four parliamentary elections following the end of the civil war (1992, 1996, 2000 and 2005). Hizballah representation in parliament rose from eight in 1992 to fourteen in 2005, giving it a majority of the twenty-seven seats allocated to the Shi'ah.[55] There was a similar pattern in the 1998 and 2004 municipal elections during which Hizballah gained a plurality of the vote. With Syrian encouragement, Hizballah and Amal joined the government formed by Fuad Siniora in 2005

[54] Fuller and Francke, op.cit., p. 225.
[55] Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, op.cit., p. 126.

following the Syrian military withdrawal, with Hizballah taking two cabinet posts and Amal three.[56] This was the first time that Hizballah was represented in the cabinet. Hizballah apparently had agreed to allow its rival organization, Amal, which had longer experience of government, to have more cabinet seats. According to Yitzhak Nakash, this "signaled the organization's desire to become increasingly involved in national politics."[57]

Despite initially stumbling over Ta'if, which the war weary Lebanese had mostly welcomed, Hizballah's military achievement in forcing Israel to leave Lebanon in 2000, its uncorrupted record and popular socio-economic agenda, have since made the party the most powerful political force among the Shi'ah and in Lebanon more generally.[58] Hizballah also appears to have moderated its political agenda, although it remains unclear if this is tactical and temporary, or strategic and permanent. There is a strong argument to be made that Hizballah will eventually use the Shi'i plurality in Lebanon's population, the community is now reckoned to be forty percent of Lebanon's population, to alter the sectarian system to its advantage. Since the mid-1980s, Hizballah's key ideological leaders, Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of the party, Shaykh Mahdi Shams al-Din, head of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council, and Nasrallah, have proposed electoral changes in Lebanon that would empower the Shi'ah. They have suggested scrapping the constituency system that entrenches sectarianism and instead having a national list system. In addition, Shams al-Din has called for the president to be elected by a national vote, which would in practice transform the post from a Maronite sinecure to one most likely held by a Muslim.[59] Such changes would transform Lebanon from a confessionally-diverse polity into a Shi'i-dominated state, of the kind that Iraq has become since 2003.[60]

As the negotiations over Ta'if demonstrated, Hizballah's ability to effect such changes are limited by the diversity of the Lebanese Shi'ah, in particular the likely objections of secular Shi'ah,[61] the opposition of other Lebanese,[62] and because of the attitude of Syria. Damascus clearly wishes to regain influence in Lebanon following the withdrawal of the Syrian army in April 2005. However, it might not welcome a Shi'i Islamic-dominated state in Lebanon because this might inflame Syria's potentially restive Sunni Muslim majority against its ruling minority 'Alawis. In a similar fashion, Syria knows that it will always need the support of Sunni Arab-led states such as Saudi Arabia, states that would be alienated by the ascendancy to power of the Lebanese Shi'ah. For Syria, therefore, policy is a balance of keeping Hizballah potent, so that it can neutralize the Israeli threat, but not so powerful that it becomes an overweening force in Lebanese politics and thereby alienates Sunni Muslims in Syria and other Arab states.

For Iran, by contrast, what matters is Hizballah's utility against Israel, which implies a degree of tension in the Iranian-Syrian alliance when it comes to Lebanon. Iranian support for Hizballah is unconditional. Tehran is less interested than Syria in Hizballah's internal position in Lebanon and the promotion of its ideology. Iranian-Hizballah relations will therefore remain close for as long as Hizballah can maintain its military capability. If one of the eventual outcomes of the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war is that Hizballah is disarmed and forced to concentrate on its political and social activities, then ties with Iran may weaken.

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[56] Nakash, ibid.
[57] Nakash, ibid.
[58] For detailed surveys see Daniel Sobelman, "Hizbollah after the Syrian withdrawal," *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (June 2005), pp. 12-18; Rodger Shanahan, "Hizballah rising: The political battle for the loyalty of the Shi'a of Lebanon," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2005), pp. 1-6, available at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2005/issue1/jv9no1a1.html>.
[59] Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders, "Know thy enemy: Hizballah, 'terrorism' and the politics of perception," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2005, p. 185.
[60] Hazem Saghieh, "Form and Content in Our Politics," *Dar al-Hayat*, November 11, 2005, available at <http://64.26.31.21:2010/opinion/OPED/11-2005/Article-20051109-751498b9-c0a8-10ed-0170-44c597e8de86/story.html>.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In The Path of Hizbullah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004) p.30.

The Eastern Wing of the "Shi'i Crescent": The Gulf States

The eastern wing of the so-called "Shi'i crescent," Kuwait, Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia, lacks cohesion and is less subject to Iranian directives than the western wing. The pattern for the eastern Arab Shi'ah is integration into the nation state and a preference for the more moderate religious guidance of Iraq's Sistani rather than Iran's Khamenei.

The Shi'ah in Kuwait: Towards Full Integration?

The position of the Kuwaiti Shi'ah is exceptional because of the relatively liberal policy of the ruling al-Sabah family. The Shi'ah are around thirty percent of Kuwait's less than one million inhabitants who are Kuwaiti nationals—the remainder of the close to three million population is composed of expatriates. The al-Sabah have put the Kuwaiti Shi'ah on an equal footing with the majority Sunnis. The Shi'ah have even periodically served as political allies of the al-Sabah, who allowed the Shi'ah into parliament in 1962, a year after Kuwait attained full independence from Britain. The al-Sabah have also granted the Shi'ah full freedom of religion and worship and significant socio-economic opportunities.

The Shi'i community of Kuwait, which is of Arab and Persian origin, has been historically fortunate, enjoying the most favorable political status, and the most religious freedom of any Shi'i community in the Arab Persian Gulf countries. The al-Sabah dynasty, the rulers of Kuwait, are Sunni tribal shaykhs from Arabia who formed the emirate of Kuwait in the mid-eighteenth century under nominal Ottoman rule, and then entrenched their rule with British protection after the late nineteenth century. The pragmatism of the al-Sabah, the influence of the British, and the ethnically fractured, and so politically weak, nature of the Kuwaiti Shi'i community created a context within which the Kuwaiti Sunni state could practice a tolerance absent elsewhere.

The result has been a notable process of integration, particularly of those Shi'ah who are wealthy upper and middle class merchants, professionals and public employees. These Shi'ah have an obvious stake in the stability and prosperity of Kuwait and their religious beliefs have been of the more moderate variety associated with Sistani in Iraq.

A minority among the Kuwaiti Shi'ah have been religious and political militants and have adopted the Iranian concept of the *velayat-e faqih*. This minority was influenced by the Iranian revolution, and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war (1980-8) during which Kuwait supported Saddam Husayn's Iraq. These militant Kuwaiti Shi'ah initiated demonstrations, riots and terrorism against the al-Sabah regime and western interests in Kuwait. In 1985, for example, Shi'i militants, helped by Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'ah, attempted to assassinate Emir Shaykh Jabir al-Sabah. The authorities responded with harsh measures, arresting and sentencing some Shi'ah, Kuwaiti and

non-Kuwaiti alike, to death.[63] Although the Kuwaiti state held back from imposing any collective punishment on the Shi'i community, the failed attempt on the emir's life and the state reaction produced a temporary inter-communal crisis and breakdown of trust between Kuwaiti Sunnis and Shi'ah.

That disruption in otherwise good intercommunal relations in Kuwait proved short-lived. The end of the Iran-Iraq war, the restrained post-war stance of Iran and the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 repaired Kuwait's temporary Sunni-Shi'i divide. Sunnis and Shi'ah alike resisted Iraq's brutal occupation, paying an equally high price. In the aftermath of the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, Kuwaitis turned on the foreign Arabs seen to have collaborated with the Iraqi occupiers, in particular the Palestinians. By contrast, Kuwaiti Sunnis accepted the Shi'ah as loyal compatriots, while the Shi'ah were encouraged by post-liberation political changes to further participate and integrate into politics and society. Among these changes, which have been significant in terms of the Arab Persian Gulf states, has been the emancipation of women. The authorities have appointed a woman to the cabinet and two women are now on Kuwait City's municipal council.[64]

Contrary to some expectations, the U.S. overthrow of Saddam's regime in Iraq in 2003 has enhanced the process of Shi'i integration in Kuwait and marginalized pro-Iranian Shi'i militants. The dynamic in Kuwait is for the process of integration of the Shi'ah to advance in tandem with official democratization policies, which have enhanced Shi'i participation in Kuwaiti politics and society. The dominant Shi'i current in Kuwait is the moderate *Shiraziyya* movement, which was organized in late 2004 to promote Kuwaiti nationhood and to neutralize the smaller, militant, pro-Iranian Shi'i current.[65] As a result, pro-Iranian Shi'i elements are unlikely to gain influence. Indeed, the more assertive Iran becomes, whether by promoting Islamism or through its nuclear program, the less likely the Kuwaiti Shi'ah are to rally to its cause. Given that many Kuwaiti Shi'ah advocate peaceful coexistence between Shi'ah and Sunnis in the Persian Gulf states, including Iraq,[66] the most likely reaction to a forward Iranian policy from Kuwaiti Shi'ah would probably be anti-Iranian sentiment.[67]

Similarly, the moderate, pro-coexistence stance of the Kuwaiti Shi'ah means that they are largely alienated from the militant message of the young Shi'i leader in Iraq, Muqtada as-Sadr. Were Muqtada as-Sadr ever to seize power in Iraq, he might attempt to use his very few Kuwaiti Shi'i followers to destabilize Kuwait and perhaps seek to incorporate it into Iraq. Such a bid for Kuwait is entirely plausible given Muqtada as-Sadr's radical Shi'i religious ideology, his anti-Americanism, and the long-standing Iraqi territorial claim on Kuwait. The religious aspect of Muqtada as-Sadr's ideology is likely to be neutralized by the fact that the Kuwaiti Shi'ah are influenced by the moderate Iraqi religious centers of Najaf and Karbala, where many Kuwaiti Shi'i clerics have been educated.

Bahrain's Shi'ah: Iraq as a Model?

The one state in the Persian Gulf that is genuinely exposed to unrest from its Shi'i population is Bahrain, where the Shi'i majority is still struggling for its share

[63] For more details see Fuller and Francke, op.cit., p. 162. For another good analysis see Laurence Louër, "Assessing the Shiite factor in the Gulf," unpublished paper, submitted to *The Middle East Journal*.
[64] William A. Samii, "Iran's Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Autumn 2001), p. 643-62.
[65] For more on the *Shiraziyya* see Suzan Nasser, "Fatima Al-Mutairi plans to compete from 21st constituency; 3 from 'Ummah Party' join 'Salaf'," *Arab Times*, May 13, 2007, available at: <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/arabtimes/kuwait/Viewdet.asp?ID=8094&cat=a>; Laurence Louër, "Il n'y a pas d' 'arc chiite'," Propos recueillis par Fabrice Aubert, *TF1*, September 20, 2006, available at <http://tf1.lci.fr/infos/monde/moyen-orient/0,,3320399,00.html>; International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, Middle East Report No. 45 (September 19, 2005), p. 6, available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3678>.
[66] Khalil Ali Haydar, "Al-Bahrain wa Maqal Shariat-Madari," *al-Watan* (Kuwait), July 19, 2007.
[67] Mohammed Abdel Qader Jasem, "A Shi'ite revival and the Gulf," in "If Iraq breaks apart (I)," *Bitterlemons-International.org*, Edition 10, Vol. 4 (March 16, 2006), available at <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=124#508>. For more on the moderate outlook of the Kuwaiti Shi'ah, see Fuller and Francke, op.cit., p. 160.

of the political and economic pie. Although there have been some small improvements in recent years, the Bahraini Shi'ah, 70 percent of Bahrain's native population of some 465,000, remain a disadvantaged majority. The smallest of the Persian Gulf states, Bahrain is also strategically one of the most important for the United States as it provides a base for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet.

The development of the Bahraini economy has been the most important factor in bettering the lot of the Bahraini Shi'ah. For generations the Shi'i majority suffered brutal persecution at the hands of Bahrain's al-Khalifa rulers, a Sunni tribe originally from Qatar. Conditions improved following the discovery of oil resources in 1932 and many Shi'ah received improved education, medical and other services. The British presence also provided a focal point for intercommunal unity. Shi'i activists joined with their Sunni comrades in pan-Arab nationalist, and sometimes Communist movements, to campaign for a constitution, an elected parliament and an end to British rule.

The problem in Bahrain was the collision between conservative attitude of the al-Khalifa regime and Shi'i assertiveness that briefly followed the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. The al-Khalifa were grudging reformers. In 1973, two years after Bahraini independence, the Emir of Bahrain Shaykh Isa ibn Salman initiated a democratic process by establishing a Constitutional Assembly, and a partially-elected, forty-four member parliament that included a number of Shi'ah. He also brought the Shi'ah into the cabinet.[68] The parliament, which was dominated by a mixed Sunni-Shi'i secular bloc, functioned well for a while. Among the six elected members of the Shi'i Religious Bloc was the cleric, Shaykh 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri, who later emerged as the chief Shi'i religious leader. However, the emir worried that his absolute powers would be constrained by parliament and, encouraged by the Saudis, he dissolved parliament in 1975.

Building upon the frustrations felt in Bahrain at the brevity of the democratic experiment, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 provided Bahrain's Shi'i majority with a model of a state that would emancipate them and represent their identity. Adding potency to this reaction was the revolutionary policy of the new Islamic regime in Iran, which lost no time inciting and directing terrorism by Bahraini Shi'ah against the Bahraini state. Furthermore, like other Arab governments in the Persian Gulf, Bahrain supported Iraq in its war against Iran, making it a target for Iranian retaliation. Iran created the Islamic Front for Liberation of Bahrain in 1981, a group of militant Bahraini Shi'ah who sought to topple the emir and install an Islamic republic. The Bahraini regime harshly suppressed these Shi'i rebels and played the sectarian card to portray the Shi'ah generally as an Iranian "fifth column," thereby dividing Sunnis from Shi'ah. An increasing number of conservative Bahrain Sunnis adopted this government line, rejecting the position taken by Sunni liberals that democratization would integrate the Shi'ah. Instead, the conservative Sunnis portrayed democracy as a vehicle for the Shi'ah to seize power in Bahrain. With the support of these Sunni conservatives, the regime imposed considerable restrictions and harsh discrimination on Shi'i political representation, employment, education and, for the first time in Bahrain, Shi'i religious worship. Following growing socio-economic hardship in Bahrain's villages, many Shi'ah staged an *intifada* (uprising) from 1994 to 1998. The rebellion mostly used stones and not firearms. The government successfully contained the unrest and punished several Shi'i religious activists, including their leader, al-Jamri. Anywhere between 600 (according to the government) and 2,500 (according to the opposition) Shi'i activists were imprisoned in January 1995, with additional detentions following clashes in January 1996.[69] For the most part the regime was successful and the influence of Iran on the Bahraini Shi'ah diminished.

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[68] For detailed accounts see Fuller and Francke, op.cit., p. 123; Nakash, op.cit., pp. 134-9; Louay Bahry, "The socioeconomic foundations of the Shi'ite opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Summer 2000, pp. 129ff.

[69] J.E. Peterson, "Bahrain: The 1994-1999 Uprising," *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, No. APBN-002 (January 2004), available at <http://www.jepeterson.net/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/apbn-002_bahrain_1994-1999_uprising.pdf>.

A period of détente between the regime and the Shi'ah began in 1999 after the ascension to power of a new emir, Hamad ibn Isa al-Khalifa. Official policy moved away from repression to democratization and liberalization. Parliament was recalled in 1999 and important political and social reforms were introduced, including female suffrage. Most importantly for intercommunal relations, the regime proclaimed a general amnesty for political prisoners and exiles, most of whom were Shi'i. Bahrain's major Shi'i groups, represented by the *al-Wifaq* National Islamic Society, an umbrella organization that brought together a variety of Shi'i groups, dismissed these reforms as "cosmetic."[70] Led by two of al-Jamri's disciples, 'Ali Salman and Isa Qassem, *al-Wifaq* argued that the reconvened parliament was not an independent body. The Shi'ah therefore boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections. *Al-Wifaq* also complained that the Shi'ah, for all the talk of reform, suffered continued discrimination, particularly in the public sector. There were also Shi'i claims that the government was attempting to alter the demographic balance in Bahrain by granting nationality to foreign Sunni Arab immigrants, thereby hoping to erode the Shi'i majority.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 proved to be an important turning point for the Bahraini Shi'ah. Many non-militant Shi'ah were attracted to the model of Shi'i power emerging in Iraq, in particular the moderate, quasi-democratic stance of Sistani.[71] The empowerment of the Iraqi Shi'ah through the ballot box is understandably an appealing strategy for most Bahraini Shi'ah, which is precisely why the Bahraini regime has reacted by restricting democratization.

Bahrain has absorbed the impact of developments in Iraq and the rhetoric of Sunni-Shi'i conflict perhaps more than any other country. Sunni Bahrainis appear more concerned about losing power than promoting democratization and some are adopting increasingly chauvinist anti-Shi'i positions, a legacy of the use of sectarian politics by the Bahraini regime in the 1980s. Some Sunni Bahrainis now take the Wahhabi view that depicts the Shi'ah as religious heretics and politically disloyal pawns of Iran. In response to President Mubarak's remark in April 2006 that the Arab Shi'ah are loyal to Iran, Bahraini Sunni parliamentarians demanded that the Bahraini Shi'ah publicly repudiate their supposed allegiance to Iran.[72] The scenes of growing sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'ah in Iraq have also worsened intercommunal relations in Bahrain. There were Shi'i protest demonstrations in Bahrain following the Samarra bombings (the main attack in 2006 and the subsequent attack on the remains of the shrine in 2007), with over 100,000 demonstrating following the February 2006 demolition of the Samarra shrine.[73]

Whether the Bahraini regime and its Shi'i subjects can reach an accommodation remains unclear. Further complicating matters is the strong interest of external powers in Bahraini internal politics. Saudi Arabia, which vigorously supported the Bahraini regime against the Shi'i *intifada*, will keep a close eye on de-

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70 Louër, op.cit., p. 3; Nakash, op.cit., p. 138; Nora Boustany, "In Bahrain, Doubts About Reform," *The Washington Post*, June 24, 2005, p. A28, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/23/AR2005062301895.html>; Neil MacFarquhar, "In Tiny Arab State, Web Takes on Ruling Elite," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/international/middleeast/15bahrain.html?ex=1294981200&en=e0e35199a027cf0d&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>; *Al-Wifaq* is the largest political society in Bahrain, comprising a coalition of Shi'i clerics and professionals. The Islamic Scholars Council, Bahrain's highest non-official Shi'i authority termed the organization "The Bloc of The Believers," and urged electoral support for them in the 2006 election, see Habib Toumi, "Bahrain Shiite body accused of bias," *Gulf News*, November 14, 2006, available at <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/06/11/14/10082339.html>.

71 MacFarquhar, op.cit.

72 Hassan M. Fattah, "An Island Kingdom Feels the Ripples from Iraq and Iran," *The New York Times,* April 16, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/16/world/middleeast/16bahrain.html?ex=1302840000&en=4b9f8dc6289b3248&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>.

73 Deutsche Presse-Agentur, "Bahraini Shiites answer Sistani call to protest bombing," *Khaleej Times*, February 23, 2006, available at <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2006/February/middleeast_February714.xml&section=middleeast>; Deutsche Presse-Agentur, "Bahraini Shiites protest in anger over Iraq shrine bombings," *m&c news*, June 13, 2007, available at <http://news.monstersandcritics.com/middleeast/news/article_1317262.php/Bahraini_Shiites_protest_in_anger_over_Iraq_shrine_bombings>.

velopments and will not want to see a third Shi'i state on its borders (along with Iran and Iraq). The United States, with specific security interests in Bahrain and broader concerns in the Persian Gulf, must also have a view on Bahrain's future internal arrangements. U.S. policy will have to navigate between its support for democratization, which in the Bahraini context might mean Shi'i majoritarianism, and supporting the Sunni-led *status quo*, which would guarantee U.S. security access to Bahrain.

The Shi'ah in Saudi Arabia: Heretics or Saudis?

The Shi'ah of eastern Saudi Arabia were for many years an isolated and harshly repressed community. Historically they had enjoyed self-rule for long periods of time, but they suffered from repeated conquest by the Wahhabis, a militant Sunni movement that was allied with the Ibn Saud tribe from the Nejd region of Arabia. Overrun first in the late eighteenth century, again in the nineteenth century, the final conquest was in 1913. The Saudi state, deeply influenced by Wahhabism, has often oppressed the Shi'ah, destroyed Shi'i shrines, forced some to become Sunnis, and generally neglected them in terms of state benefits and patronage. Until recently, the Shi'ah of eastern Saudi Arabia were at best allowed to practice their faith in private.

The most oppressed Muslim minority in the Arab East for most of the twentieth century, the Saudi Shi'ah are geographically compact as they live overwhelmingly in the regions of Hasa and Qatif. They are between three percent and eight percent of the kingdom's Saudi population of around twenty-two million (which includes around five and a half million expatriates). Isolated both within Saudi Arabia and the broader Persian Gulf, the Saudi Shi'ah have experienced some mild process of integration since the early 1990s when relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran began to improve.

The Saudis brutally persecuted the Shi'ah following their conquest of Hasa in 1913.[74] Considered heretics, the Shi'ah were barred from holding positions in public institutions, were discriminated against in the legal and educational systems, and were deprived of economic opportunities. The Saudi regime also violated the basic religious and cultural rights of the Shi'ah by banning the construction of mosques and community centers, the publication of Shi'i texts and the teaching of Shi'ism. Saudi Arabia also inflicted periodic physical violence, arrests and house demolitions on its Shi'i minority.

As was the case elsewhere, Shi'i grievances were expressed during the 1950s and 1960s by Communist, Socialist and pan-Arab nationalist movements. The fading credibility of these secular ideologies meant that as of the late 1960s small Shi'i Islamic revolutionary movements emerged in Saudi Arabia.[75] For the most part, their agenda was non-violent and educational, but clearly religious rather than secular.

The Islamic revolution in Iran had a significant impact on the Saudi Shi'ah, prompting Saudi Shi'i Islamists, led by Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, to stage an *intifada* in the eastern province against what they called the "illegal" Saudi regime.[76] The Saudis crushed the rising mercilessly. For the most part, Saudi Shi'i opposition petered out or went into exile. Only a small, militant group, Saudi Hizballah, continued to fight against the

[74] Fuller and Francke, op.cit., pp. 131ff; Mamoun Fandy, "From confrontation to creative resistance: the Shi'a's oppositional discourse in Saudi Arabia," *Critique,* No. 9 (Fall 1996), pp. 3-5.
[75] For more on the Shi'i Islamic reform movements in Saudi Arabia, see International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, op.cit., pp.2-4.
[76] For a detailed study see Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May 2006), pp. 213-33.

Saudi regime, a group that had close Iranian links. Saudi Hizballah has been accused of killing U.S. servicemen at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996.[77]

The most representative Saudi Shi'i current, under al-Saffar, eventually adopted a pragmatic position. Al-Saffar and his followers advocated Islamic pluralism, along with democratization and human rights. He also sought negotiations with the Saudi authorities to introduce reforms to ameliorate the position of the Shi'ah. Among the reforms that al-Saffar proposed were recognition of Shi'ism as an Islamic sect, the right to freedom of religious practice, to build mosques and seminaries, and equal opportunities in educational, political and military institutions.

The initial Saudi government response to these overtures was positive, thanks to the changed geopolitics of the Persian Gulf. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the rallying to the Saudi state of the Shi'ah, there was a period of improved Saudi-Iranian relations. During 1993 and 1994, the Saudi authorities took a series of conciliatory steps toward their Shi'i subjects, declaring a truce and inviting Shi'i exiles to return to the kingdom.[78] The government also reduced the extent of discriminatory practices, and in 1994 apparently recognized the Shi'i Ja'fari religious law as a *madhab* (school of Islamic law) alongside the four existing Sunni schools of Islamic law.[79]

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, attacks conducted mostly by Saudi nationals, there was widespread criticism that the nature of the Saudi state had spawned the terrorist menace. The Saudi authorities responded with further attempts at liberalization, change in part motivated by a desire to improve their image of the kingdom in the United States. Crown Prince Abdullah, who had been ruling the kingdom since the mid-1990s due to the illness of his brother, King Fahd, proclaimed a "national dialogue" that included talks with al-Saffar to co-opt the moderate Shi'ah and isolate the pro-Iranian militants.[80] The authorities introduced a series of reforms to allow for some degree of Shi'i integration. Although noticeable, given how poorly developed of Shi'i community life in Saudi Arabia has long been, these reforms have been largely half-hearted. The government has been held back in its attempt to bring the Shi'ah into the national fold by its continuing attitude that the Shi'ah pose a security threat and the powerful Wahhabi religious establishment's view that the Shi'ah are unacceptable heretics. The danger of such an approach is that it may fail to grasp the opportunity presented by this Arab Shi'i community that seeks political and socio-economic integration and that embraces the religious moderation and political pragmatism of Sistani. By rejecting the desire of the Saudi Shi'ah to become Saudis on an equal par with the kingdom's Sunni majority, the Saudi regime could, in the long-term, encourage the Saudi Shi'ah to turn to the violent politics of the still active, Iranian-controlled Saudi Hizballah. It is therefore a U.S. interest to induce the Saudi Arabian government to improve the political, socio-economic and cultural-religious conditions of the Saudi Shi'ah to integrate them into the Saudi Arabian state.

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[77] For more on Saudi Hizballah, see International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, op.cit., p. 6; "Saudi Hezbollah," *GlobalSecurity.org*, n.d., available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/saudi-hezbollah.htm>; FBI, *Press Release*, June 21, 2001, available at <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel01/khobar.htm>; and Eitan Azani, "Iran is behind the 1996 terrorist attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi-Arabia by the Saudi Hezbollah," *The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, n.d., available at <http://www.ict.org.il/apage/9048.php>.
[78] International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, op.cit., p.4; Fuller and Francke, op.cit., p. 189.
[79] There is some doubt about the recognition of Shi'i Ja'fari religious law as a *madhab*. See Fuller and Francke, op.cit., p. 190, footnote on p. 275.
[80] Louër, op.cit., p. 9; Nakash, op.cit., pp. 131-3.

Conclusion

The "Shi'i crescent" is largely a myth that masks important, but malleable state interests. By rejecting this myth, the United States can see the Shi'ah in the Middle East for what they are: varied communities with as much dividing them as uniting them, potential partners in some places, aspiring adversaries in others.

At the core of the issue of the Shi'ah in the Middle East is the eventual nature of relations between Iran and Shi'i Arab Iraq, relations that will have a tremendous impact upon the smaller Shi'i communities in the Arab Middle East. Tehran prefers an undivided but weak Shi'i-dominated Iraq rather than a divided Iraq into three states: Shi'i, Sunni and Kurdish. A disintegrated Iraq poses a mixture of opportunity and threat that Iran would probably prefer to avoid. Iran is likely to exert strong influence over any Shi'i mini-state in southern Iraq and may even annex it.[81] At the same time, Iran might encounter a significant domestic challenge were there to be an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq because this might encourage separatist feelings in Iran's Kurdish population.

Even if the Iraqi Shi'ah Arabs emerge dominant and victorious in the current conflict with Iraq's Sunni Arabs, they might not prove to be the close allies of Iran that many imagine. Iran, after all, has pursued policies in contradiction with those of its apparent Iraqi Shi'i allies. For the moment, Iran, like Syria, has no stake in a stable Iraq. Fostering instability in Iraq is a means of indirectly inflicting damage on the United States, but it has also imposed a steep cost on the Iraqi Shi'ah. Quite how relations between Iran and Iraq will develop over the long-term is unclear, but the end result might not be to Iran's liking.

Shi'i parties and organizations in the Arab Middle East were initially inspired by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and with Iranian assistance staged violent but abortive uprisings in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. That approach has largely changed, thanks to changes in Iranian policy and a greater willingness by Sunni Arab-dominated states in the Persian Gulf to be more open to their Shi'i populations. The empowerment of the Iraqi Shi'ah has cemented that new approach. Growing numbers of Shi'ah prefer social and political integration on equal terms in their national communities and reject Sunni accusations that they are loyal to Iran.[82] The Kuwaiti Shi'ah have made the most headway in this regard. Even Hizballah in Lebanon has nominally changed its attitude and claims to

[81] For more on Iran's influence over the Shi'ah of Iraq, see Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006, pp. 1-3, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060701faessay85405/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise.html>.

[82] Mashari Al-Dhayadi, "Tasrihat Mubarak Sadma fi al-waqt al-Munasib," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 11, 2006.

seek integration, although deep down it still harbors a desire to seize central authority in Lebanon on the basis of the Shi'i plurality. This trend is not universal, as the rigid attitudes of the Bahraini and Saudi Arabian authorities demonstrate, attitudes that have not facilitated Shi'i integration.[83]

The crucial challenge for the United States is to pacify Iraq, create a viable government there, and then to withdraw U.S. troops. Such a self-sufficient Iraq will act not as a proxy of Iran and also not as a force for radical change among the Arab Shi'ah of the Persian Gulf.

Irrespective of developments in Iraq, Washington should encourage Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to liberalize their policies toward their Shi'ah and facilitate their integration into the nation state. The United States, and Israel, can help these states take these important domestic reform steps by intensifying their efforts to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which will strengthen Sunni Arab regimes with their domestic public opinions and demonstrate a tangible benefit from their alliance with the United States.

With regard to Lebanon and Syria, the United States and Israel may be able to pull Syria away from its alliance with Iran and Hizballah. The Syrian 'Alawi secular government essentially struck a strategic alliance with Islamic Iran in order to curb its Iraqi rival and counter its Israeli enemy. One of these enemies is now gone, the other is willing to talk peace. Engagement with Damascus through constructive dialogue could yield a U.S.-Syrian agreement over Iraq and the Israeli return of the Golan Heights to Syria in return for peace. Such accommodations between the United States and Syria and between Israel and Syria could isolate Hizballah. Israel could further reduce Hizballah's influence by withdrawing from the Sheba'a Farms, a disputed area adjacent to the Golan Heights for which Hizballah claims still to be fighting, within the context of an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement. In return, Syria would undertake to contain Hizballah's military power. Such bold and imaginative steps would enhance Hizballah's political integration into Lebanon while diminishing the movement's dependence upon Iran.

Moreover, an opening to Damascus exists courtesy of the United States' moderate Arab allies. This connection to the moderate Arab states provides a policy opportunity that is foreclosed if the overwrought theory of a "Shi'i crescent" is taken at face value. The very fact that Syria is willing to consider another foreign policy option means that the United States and Israel could potentially draw Syria away from the orbit of Iran and Hizballah. To do so they would need to engage Damascus in negotiations that would lead to Syria helping to pacify Iraq, instead of undermining it, and Israel returning the Golan Heights to Syria in return for a peace agreement and the normalization of relations. For the foreseeable future, such a *volte face* in Syrian policy appears to be unlikely, because of U.S. and Israeli hostility to Syria as well as the domestic problem of how the regime would sell such a policy reorientation to its people. Nonetheless, the possibility exists and should not be discounted.

[83] Fuller and Francke, op.cit., p.119-29, 179.

The Saban Center for Middle East Policy

The Saban Center for Middle East Policy was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies, is the Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director of Research. Joining them is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers in the Middle East. They include Tamara Cofman Wittes, a specialist on political reform in the Arab world who directs the Project on Middle East Democracy and Development; Bruce Riedel, who served as a senior advisor to three Presidents on the Middle East and South Asia at the National Security Council during a twenty-nine year career in the CIA, a specialist on counterterrorism; Suzanne Maloney, a former senior State Department official who focuses on Iran and economic development; Shibley Telhami, who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland; and Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings, led by Brookings Vice President Carlos Pascual.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Persian Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state-sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, and the methods required to promote democratization.

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